

Resurrection Breakfast

John 20:1-14

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Easter was never as interesting as Christmas in the world of my growing up. Christmas filled the house with the rich fragrances of the freshly-cut fir tree and the baking of cookies, the growing mound of gift-wrapped presents, and, on the day itself, our house filled with cousins and aunts and uncles, laughter and stories, and an elaborate feast. At church there were wreaths and swags that great parties of us had gone into the foothills to gather, homespun pageantry in which everyone seemed to get a “part,” and carols that everyone knew how to sing and did sing. Even the weather cooperated. Our Montana mountains furnished plenty of snow and ice so that everyone could sled and ski and skate. Indoors or outdoors, festivity reigned. Everything ordinary sparkled.

Easter, by contrast, seemed flat. Our household routines were as usual, except that my brother and sister and I all got a new “Easter” article of clothing to wear to church; as the oldest child, I usually got a necktie that made me feel stiff and unnatural. The lilies in the sanctuary were imported from outside. The music at worship featured anthems that the best singers were selected to perform. And our family always ate Easter dinner at the Temple Tea Room, the only restaurant in town that had linen on the tables and where the waitresses wore dresses instead of blue jeans. Both Easter and Christmas were special, but Easter in a much more refined way. I couldn’t wait to get home and take off my necktie.

So now, as an adult, I am delighted to find that the final Easter story given in our scriptures, the one told by St. John, is a story I can find myself in without wearing a necktie. That this is the final resurrection story in the fourth and final gospel, gives it a certain prominence. It is special, but as I think you will see, not refined.

Here’s the story.

We have a long tradition in this Christian way of life that practices the preparing, serving, and eating of meals as formational for living the resurrection life. The tradition is given its shape and much of its content by our scriptures, comes into sharp focus in the sacrament of the eucharist, and gets expressed and re-expressed every day all over the world in kitchens and around campfires as men, women, and children, whether by hunger or habit, come together and eat meals ranging from spaghetti and meatballs, to peanut butter sandwiches, to venison stews.

Jesus prepares and eats breakfast with seven of his disciples on a Galilee beach. The positioning is emphatic, attention-getting.

The seven disciples have recently left Jerusalem. Twice before they left, on successive Sundays, they saw and were in conversation with the resurrected Jesus. Now they are back in their home country of Galilee.

Earlier (Matthew tells that story) they had been given their apostolic commission “Go...make disciples...baptizing them...and teaching them...” (Mt. 28: 19-20). And now, for reasons we are not told, seven of the original eleven are back at their old fishing grounds, the Sea of Galilee, *not* doing what they had so recently been told to do.

Why? Why this sudden shift from obedience to disobedience? Why weren't they getting ready to go? Why didn't they have the maps out, studying the best routes to Alexandria and Antioch, Damascus and Athens? Why weren't they chafing at the bit, energized and eager to get on their way? Why were they dawdling in Galilee?

Asking "why" questions for which there is no clear answer in the text can be risky. But I am going to risk it because I am pretty sure I know why I, and many of the Christians with whom I have lived through the years, would have been off fishing in Galilee under similar circumstances.

Peter had organized his friends for a night of fishing. He and his fellow followers of Jesus were still reeling from the impact of the crucifixion and resurrection, but mostly, I think, from the resurrection. For Peter and the others, the crucifixion was truly horrible; they watched their Master and Friend die that agonized, torturous, and mocking death. There is no way we can soften or minimize the impact of Jesus' death on these disciples. But at the same time, that death took place in the natural order of things. They had all seen crucifixions take place before. Everybody who lived in Palestine in those days had—public crucifixion was the Roman method of choice for dealing out the death penalty. It served the dual purpose of getting rid of enemies of the state and putting the fear of Rome in anyone who might be thinking of making trouble. The crucifixion-death of Jesus was horrible, but it was not unique.

But resurrection was something else. Whatever Peter and his friends had previously imagined or believed about resurrection didn't prepare them for what they were dealing with now. Resurrection, if you believe in it, has to do with the next life; it is something that happens to you *after* you are dead and buried, and it places you secure in heaven for eternity.

But Jesus' resurrection took place on earth among the living. These first witnesses to and participants in Jesus' resurrection were quite decidedly not in heaven; they were walking the same old roads over the same old ground they had grown up on, talking and working with the same old people they had lived with all their lives. It was here on this familiar ground, in the company of these familiar friends, that they witnessed Jesus raised from the dead, alive, talking and eating in their company. A lifetime of assumptions regarding resurrection—the entire Jewish world of thought and discussion on resurrection!—went suddenly spinning out of control. The gospel writers grope for words to name their response: wonder, amazement, astonishment. Despite centuries of preparation among their Hebrew ancestors, nothing had prepared them for this. They are understandably disoriented. They have been given irrefutable evidence that Jesus is alive among them, but they haven't yet been able to accommodate their sense of reality to a resurrection *now*, *here*. Resurrection-now had never occurred to them. Resurrection in this life was unthinkable—at least they had never thought of it. Resurrection-now was too large a concept to fit into their idea of how the world worked. They can't wrap their minds around it. Imaginatively and emotionally they are at loose ends.

And that, I think, is why they are back fishing. They need to reinforce their grip on everyday reality—the country they grew up in, the work they feel at home in, the sea and fishing boat, the fish and nets. They need to subject this new revelation of resurrection to the workday conditions of their lives. Or perhaps it's the other

way around: they need to subject the workday conditions of their lives to this new revelation of resurrection. Jesus was radically reconfigured, redefined, by resurrection; resurrection has just as radically reconfigured and redefined them, too. The familiar concept of resurrection as life after death was now being totally recast as life in the “land of the living” (Ps. 116:9). To assimilate this extraordinary event into their ordinary lives, they instinctively plunge into the old routines in their old workplace. I am not supposing that this was so much a thought-out plan, the kind of thing we sometimes name as a “spiritual discipline,” but simply a gut feeling for dealing with the new reality in which they were immersed.

As it turned out, it worked. Not the fishing itself, for they fished all night and “caught nothing...” (John 21:3). What worked was their night of fishing as a way of realizing that Jesus’ resurrection does, in fact, fit into and embrace all the details of an ordinary working life.

That morning as the sun rises, Jesus is standing on the beach. The seven disciples, a hundred yards out from the shore (imagine the length of a football field) don’t recognize him. He calls to them, asking about their luck, and learns that they have caught nothing. He directs them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. They do it, and their net fills with fish.

In Jerusalem, John was the first one at the empty tomb to realize what had happened; here in Galilee he is also the first to get it. He recognizes the resurrected Jesus and tells Peter, “It is the Lord!” (21: 7). Peter dives into the water and swims to shore to greet Jesus, leaving his companions to the work of rowing and dragging in the full net of fish. When the rest of them get to shore, they find that Jesus has prepared a meal of fish and bread for them on the beach. After Peter helps his companions land the fish, Jesus calls them to the meal: “Come and have breakfast” (21: 12). But not until now do all seven know that they are dealing with “the Lord” (21: 12), the resurrection Jesus. Jesus hands around the bread and fish: a resurrection breakfast.

Doesn’t it strike us a little odd that it takes the seven so long to recognize Jesus? Why didn’t they get it all at once? John recognizes him immediately while still a hundred yards from the shore. Then Peter, in characteristic Peter fashion, makes a big splash, noisily advertising his recognition by swimming to greet Jesus. But the others? Thomas, Nathanael, James, and the two unnamed ones? Why were they so slow to see what was right before their eyes? After all, it wasn’t their first resurrection encounter with Jesus. They had already seen and conversed with Jesus on two separate occasions. Luke also tells us a resurrection meal story in which recognition was unaccountably delayed (Luke 24), so it isn’t as if this Galilee story is an anomaly.

The fact is that this was a pretty dramatic meeting—the crucified Jesus alive among them! Why didn’t they all get it at once?

If we can’t answer that question satisfactorily, we can at least observe that there is more to recognizing the resurrected Jesus than what we can gather from our eyesight. Participation in resurrection cannot be forced or engineered; there is something of readiness involved. The resurrection appearance on the Galilee beach did not overwhelm. Recognition and confession were not forced. Jesus did not use his resurrection presence to bully people into worship or discipleship. Emily Dickinson understood this in her sentence, “The truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.”

I was fortunate to grow up in a preaching culture that honored and nurtured the imagination. My pastors, all of whom were meagerly schooled, were superb preachers. They could take anything in our community and lives, however mundane and out-of-the-way, and bring it into the biblical story where we suddenly realized it as large and eternally significant. The stories, the *lives*, of Abraham and Elijah, David and Paul—and Jesus, mostly Jesus—were preached into the fabric of my life through those years.

Except for Easter. Unaccountably, on Easter there were no stories, no imagination. In place of them there were arguments, proofs, evidence, logic, and documentation. We were rigorously trained, point-by-point, in arguments that proved the truth of the resurrection so that, armed with a syllogism, we would be able to wrestle any unbeliever to the ground. One visiting evangelist who came the Easter I was fifteen years old gave us thirteen incontrovertible proofs that Jesus rose from the dead. It took him an hour and a half.

The four gospel writers seem not to be proving anything about Jesus in their resurrection accounts, but inviting us into participating in and practicing a resurrection life ourselves. John's final resurrection story is of a piece with his gospel-writing predecessors. He doesn't present Jesus' resurrection as forcing belief. John and his six companions believed as they participated with, received from, and were engaged by Jesus at breakfast on the beach: "Please pass the bread...Here, have some more fish..."

It interests me greatly that this resurrection breakfast was what we would call "a working meal." It was not especially prepared and staged to make a dramatic impact. Jesus apparently had not thought to gather his Galilean women followers together to provide background music on the beach in a well-rehearsed anthem to make this first Easter sunrise breakfast unforgettable. Instead, it was a natural part of a working day after a long night of hard work. As the seven fishermen came ashore, we can be quite sure that they were ravenous, grateful for fish frying over the fire and for the bread still warm: seven hungry men, dressed in their work clothes, eating bread and fish with their fingers, in the company of the resurrected Jesus.

There is a place for getting away from our daily lives to pray and reflect and rest. Jesus is also a model for doing this: "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35). But however much these practices of withdrawal are useful, even necessary, Jesus' resurrection breakfast with the seven tells us that an ordinary working meal is as good a place as any for spiritual formation, for formation-by-resurrection. Every time we pick up a knife and fork, every time we say, "Pass the salt, please," every time we take a second helping of cauliflower, we are in a setting congenial to formation-by-resurrection. Our Sunday worship is important; the Bible studies we attend are important; the retreats we make are important. But over a lifetime, the presence (even when unrecognized) of the risen Christ at our meals may be far more formative of the life of Christ in us.

And here's why: The common meal is a primary, maybe *the* primary way by which we take care of our physical need for food, our social need for conversation and intimacy, and our cultural need to carry on traditions and convey values—what philosopher Albert Borgmann calls "the culture of the table." The meal—preparation, serving, eating, cleaning up—has always been a microcosm of the intricate

realities that combine to make up even the simplest life of women, men, and children. Because it is so inclusive (anyone and everyone can be included in the meal) and because it is so comprehensive (touching on the entire range of physical, social, cultural existence), the meal provides an endless supply of connections for virtually everything we do as human beings: giving and receiving, knowing and being known, accepting and being accepted, bounty and generosity.

And always, deeply embedded in the common meal, is the experience of sacrifice. One life is given so that another may live. It may be the life of a carrot or cucumber, a fish or duck, a lamb or heifer. Every meal involves us in a complex, sacrificial world of giving and receiving. Life feeds life. We are not sufficient to ourselves. We live by life and lives given to us.

The repeated prominence of meals in our lives keeps us intimately connected to our families and the traditions in which we are reared, personally available to friends and guests, and morally related to the hungry. Perhaps most important of all, it keeps us as participants in the endless variations in the context and conditions in which Jesus called the seven to have a resurrection breakfast with him on the Galilee beach.

We keep all this in focus, this resurrection presence of Jesus and our resurrection-shaped workday lives, by receiving the Holy Eucharist (or Holy Communion or Lord's Table). But there is a strong tradition in Christian practice of treating every meal as a kind of mini-sacrament. Every meal derives from and extends the Eucharistic meal into our daily eating and drinking, on to our kitchen tables at which the risen Christ is present as host.

Think of it: all the elements of formation-by-resurrection present every time we sit down to a meal and invoke Jesus as host. It's a wonderful thing, really—the resurrection Jesus present as one with us just as he finds us, as we prepare and bless, serve and eat our breakfast coffee and bacon and grits and eggs.