

The Unfolding of Easter

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The Third Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2019

“This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.” – John 21:14

In the blink of an eye, it seems, we're here at the third Sunday of Easter already. Seems like only yesterday we were gathering in the Social Hall getting ready to tuck into a terrific Easter breakfast buffet that would rival anything we could find in a commercial establishment: eggs and sausage and potatoes and mushrooms and sweet rolls and muffins and granola and yoghurt and cantaloupe and strawberries and blueberries and . . . oh, my. Even baked beans to remind us of our European breakfasts. It was a great way to start the day, just like the nutritionists tell us.

And just like the Gospel of John tells us in this morning's Easter-season reading. Jesus and a handful of his disciples start their new life together with breakfast. Not the feast that we enjoyed – their menu was smoked fish and pita – but still a perfectly tasty treat when you're eating outdoors over a campfire and you've fished all night and you've got nothing to show for it. It's the kind of nourishment that restores soul as well as body, which is what all meals are meant to do.

We've lost the soul-nourishing aspect of eating, and it's a shame. For most of human history, when people sat down to eat together, they did so with a sense of gratitude, first of all, that they had something to sit down to at all, and secondly, with a sense of gratitude for the people they had to eat it with. Julia Child is supposed to have said that when it comes to dinner, what's on the chairs is more important than what's on the table. Mealtime was once a time to pause, to step back, take a breath, and re-connect. It was a time to savor not only the goodness on the table but the goodness that surrounds all our tables as well. Life, which can get so scrunched up at times with commitments and obligations and worries and frustrations has a chance to unfold at the table, and a good Cabernet often helps with that process.

John doesn't tell us if Jesus and Peter and his crew had a decent wine to accompany their fish and bread, but it's very likely that they did, at least decent by their standards. Wine was the beverage of choice in that day and in that part of the world, and it always embarrassed my tee-totaling Baptist forebears that Jesus and his followers were regularly drinking wine, when we didn't drink alcohol at all. We would dearly love for our Savior to have used buttermilk at the Last Supper, but no matter how we turned and twisted Scripture, we couldn't get it to say that, and so we just silently swapped in Welch's unfermented grape juice for the wine that the evangelists tell us Jesus drank, and then we got on with living what we thought was good Christian lives.

And that's one of the things John is trying to tell us in this third appearance of Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection: Easter means, among other things, that we have to get on with our lives as followers of Jesus even though the rest of the world stays very much the same: same need to make a living, same need to pay the bills, same need to keep the doctors' appointments. It all seems so ordinary and lifelike, and that may feel like a disappointment after the lilies and trumpets and astonishing proclamation of Easter day: “Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!”

But that's the way Easter works: Christ IS risen, risen indeed – and yet the need for breakfast remains. The need for instructions for Jesus' followers remains. To need for us to continue to sort out our priorities remains: “Peter, do you love me more than these?” The need for what one poet has called “the glorious ordinary” remains.

And that's what Easter is for – the glorious ordinary. Easter is for ordinary people living ordinary lives doing ordinary things. Those are the lives in desperate need of transformation. It is the ordinary world, with its endless ways for people to treat one another badly, with its intractable problems of poverty and injustice, and its inscrutable mysteries of pain and suffering that is the realm of redemption. Easter is that transformation within the ordinary that both changes everything and also leaves everything intact: the things you love, the things you fear, the things you want, the things you meet, the things you need. Breakfast, lunch, dinner. Doctors appointments, vet appointments, the cable guy, the check-out girl. All so very ordinary, and yet, because of Easter, all so extraordinary at the same time.

This is what Emily tries to tell people in Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*. “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?”

Do any of you – or, rather, do all of you, out there in Pewville – do you realize how beautiful and wonderful and eternal life is beneath the layers and layers of worry and frustration and confusion and regret with which we embalm our existence? Do you realize what you're throwing away when you waste a single moment in anger or fear or indifference? Or do you realize how pointless it is to agonize over decisions and second-guess ourselves when tomorrow is not assured?

Remember the fellow who built his bigger barns to store up his success? That very night, those barns turned out to belong to somebody else. Jesus told that little story not so that we would hot-foot it over to the Holy Land to try to find the rotting foundations of those barns, but rather so that we would take to heart the truth that life is contingent – that tomorrow, just like yesterday and today, which were both tomorrows once upon a time – is contingent upon God's grace. Live that grace that is given to you today – live Easter today – and let tomorrow continue in God's eternity.

As most of you know, I turned sixty a couple of weeks ago, and I finally feel like I'm all grown up. I've waited a long time for adulthood to get here, and I've spent a fair number of years getting ready for it. The awareness of life's contingent nature – that I am one sharp pain or one wrong turn in traffic away from death, or one diagnosis away from a new way of life – is impressing itself upon me with fresh urgency now. And because I know how vulnerable I am and how dependent I am upon nothing less than God's mercy, I worry less. I worry less because the one thing that is essential to my existence – the mercy of God – has already been promised to me, so I have a clearer sense of why it's pointless to worry. I'm not oblivious to what's going on around me or within me – those aches and pains aren't going away, after all, and the loopiness of another election cycle is already upon us – but as the modest nature of my accomplishments becomes clearer, and as the speed with which life has reached this point for me becomes more breathtaking, and as the cyclical nature of human folly becomes less debatable, I think I'm more realistic now about what matters in this world and in any world to come.

A dear friend and former boss, Mary Lee Bossert, died a few weeks ago in Georgia, and when I went to the website of the funeral home in charge of her arrangements, I found this quote by Kurt Vonnegut: “Enjoy the little things in life, because one day you'll look back and realize they were the big things.”

That's how Easter unfolds in our lives: that great big joyous extraordinary thing unfolding within those little ordinary things like a seaside breakfast in the undying presence of the crucified and risen

Jesus Christ. It's amazing, really.
Thanks be to God.