



## ***“In the Breaking of the Bread”***

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*Luke 24:28-31*

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It was Sunday evening, three days after the crucifixion of Jesus. Two companions traveled the Road to Emmaus, about a 7-mile walk from Jerusalem. Along the way, they recounted the tragic events they had seen unfold, the disappointment, grief, and pain that gripped them. Adding to this complex mix of emotions was confusion and uncertainty: the women who attended the tomb that morning found it empty, describing that a mysterious figure in gleaming, bright clothing told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. But as yet, the two on the road that evening did not believe.

As they made their way, a stranger approached and asked them what they were discussing. When they recounted their experience, he began to reinterpret their story in light of scripture. He said that everything that happened to Jesus was part of God’s plan.

When they reached Emmaus, the two companions turned for home, but the stranger continued. They called out, urging him not to go, for it was late in the day and darkness was approaching. “Stay with us.”

Later, as they sat down to share a meal, the stranger did something unexpected. Instead of waiting to be served as the guest, he took the bread in his hands, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. When he did, they suddenly saw this was no stranger, but Jesus himself!

Why had they not recognized him earlier? He wasn’t just someone they’d seen in passing – they’d walked together a long way. They’d even invited him into their home to spend the night. How had they come to be there in the first place, when the rest of the disciples remained in Jerusalem? What did Jesus say to them as they walked? Why doesn’t Luke share that teaching with us? What was it about the way he handled the bread at table that opened their eyes? And why did he immediately vanish from their sight when they recognized him?

Luke is a master storyteller. He never over-explains. He trusts the readers to exercise our imagination, reflecting on the things happening beneath the text. He invites us into the realm of wonder, of mystery, of *faith*. He gives us just enough cues to pique our interest, omitting just enough to make us explore more deeply. As you hear this story today, what catches your attention? What raises your curiosity? How do you fill in the blanks?

Luke sets us up to anticipate revelation. He told us in verse 15 that Jesus was the stranger who appeared on the road that day. We’re in on the secret. It is only the other characters in the story who are in the dark about his true identity. The only uncertainty for us is when Jesus will be revealed. Not on the road. Not in his teaching. Not when he enters their home. Not even when he sits face-to-face with them at the table.

It is during the meal, in a surprising reversal of roles, when Jesus is finally revealed to them. The guest becomes the host. It is not his *home*, but it becomes his *table*. Their eyes are opened, and just like that, he is gone from their midst. They would later recount that Christ was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

There’s a deeper meaning here than is immediately apparent. The action is familiar. “He took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” We recall the Upper Room, at the Last Supper, how Jesus “took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them.” (Luke 22:19) This meal

at a home in Emmaus is not just an ordinary meal. It is a *sacramental* meal, an encounter that harkens back to the Last Supper and the new covenant.

But Luke is doing more than just bearing witness to the risen Christ. *He is instructing the church.* When we first meet the two companions, they are distraught, straggling home in disbelief. By the conclusion of the story, they're dashing back to Jerusalem, eager to share their witness. What changed? When Jesus appeared, he opened the scriptures to them and broke bread with them. *Word and Table*, the two primary actions of Christian worship. Luke's point is not that *a few people* witnessed the risen Christ, but that whenever we proclaim the Word and share in the sacrament, *we* experience the risen Christ, too. Through worship, we keep Christ alive in our hearts and in our experience. This is a call to action, a call to faith.

Why did Jesus vanish from their midst? Again, we're left to wonder. Let's imagine that Jesus *hadn't* disappeared at that moment. What would have happened next? Do you think these two would have been so eager to return to Jerusalem and spread the news? Jesus was right there, in their home, at their table. They had a million questions to ask, things to clarify, fears to explore, instructions to write down. Here, out of the spotlight of the city, away from the heat of the Imperial Guard, they could safely bask in Jesus's presence. They could regroup, maybe invite other disciples here, keep things in control. *Sounds a lot like the church.*

But we're not meant to play it safe. We aren't called to keep Jesus to ourselves. The church isn't a club of like-minded converts, but a radical mission to proclaim the Gospel to the world through witness and action. Our place isn't to stick together and rest in the presence of God, but to get up and run, to share the Good News and continue the work of Christ.

In a few moments, we'll share in Holy Communion, gathering at the table to remember and pray that Jesus will be made known to us again in the breaking of the bread. But what it is about Communion that makes it holy? And why is it so important for us to practice it regularly?

When Luke describes Jesus at the table with the two companions from Emmaus, he uses four verbs: *took, blessed, broke, and gave.* We've already seen how that four-fold action parallels Jesus's action at the Last Supper. But that's not the only place Luke uses those four verbs to describe what Jesus does with bread. Once, when Jesus and the disciples had withdrawn by themselves to a deserted place to rest, the crowds found them and followed. Instead of withdrawing further, Jesus welcomed the people, taught them, and healed those who were sick among them. As the day was drawing late, they became hungry. By that time, Luke estimates that number of men in the crowd, not counting women and children, exceeded 5,000. The disciples wanted to send them away to provision themselves, but Jesus told the disciples to feed them. They only had five loaves and two small fish. But Jesus "*took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, and broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. Everyone ate until they were full, and the disciples filled twelve baskets with the leftovers.*" (Luke 9:16-17) Jesus *took, blessed, broke, gave.*

Three meals, three different settings, each one a mystery and a miracle, revealing Christ's power and presence. Luke is signaling that it isn't where we are or what we say or how we think or even having the right beliefs that makes our table into a sacrament. It isn't the bread we use or whether we have wine or grape juice that matters, but that Christ is made present to all. No matter how we set the Communion table, when we come to it in Christ's name, it becomes *his* table, not ours. In the words of the late Fred Craddock, "It is the presence of Christ at a table opened to a stranger which transforms an ordinary supper into the sacrament."<sup>1</sup> How exactly Christ is present we cannot explain; the church calls it a *Holy Mystery*. But there is power in this meal – to open our eyes, to make Christ known, and to unite us in God's grace. The church's purpose is to practice Christ's presence through Word and Table and to share it with the world.

During the past year, a great deal has been said and written about whether and how to receive Communion in times of necessary physical separation. The theological implications of those discussions matter

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Luke*. In *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (1990), 286.

a great deal: *Does this communal action hold the same significance without the gathered community? Is this merely a symbolic act or is it a sacred bond? Can we receive Communion at home on our own without diminishing its meaning or the instituted presence of the Holy Spirit?* Many of our fellow Christians have elected to fast from the Eucharist until the faith community can gather in person to participate fully. Others have argued that a global pandemic qualifies as communion *in extremis*, an exception to usual sacramental practice permissible under extreme circumstances. While we at Church of the Saviour have emphasized opportunities to receive Holy Communion at in-person, parking lot gatherings on World Communion Sunday and Maundy Thursday, I have sparingly practiced “virtual communion” during worship as a sharing in the body and blood of Christ through sacred blessing instituted across time and space. I take the sacraments seriously and recognize the concern. But if the Spirit can be uniquely present in the ordinary elements we bless in the gathered community, why should that same Spirit be limited by the physical distance that separates us? Is not a virtual gathering of community still the gathered community?

The pandemic has taken its toll on us in many ways. We’ve lost beloved members of our faith community while being prevented from standing together in our grief to proclaim Resurrection. We’ve struggled to keep pace with the needs of those cut off from human contact, many of them facing long-term consequences of prolonged social and spiritual isolation. We’ve wrestled with how to be a more intentionally anti-racist congregation in the face of maddening but unsurprising episodes that lay bare the racial disparity we too often choose not to see, while being restricted to remote meetings that limit our activity and prevent us from looking one another in the eyes to take in one another’s pain. Our children have been asked to learn remotely with or without the resources needed for success; and after a week of staring at a screen, many understandably choose not to spend another hour on a device to grow in their faith with their church. The hymns, the prayers, the fellowship, the feelings of peace just being in this remarkable sacred space have all been absent at the very time we have needed them most. We continue to walk this path, longing for what was, traumatized by what is, and uncertain what the future will hold.

Friends, Christ is present in this moment, though perhaps not immediately recognized or known. It is Christ who stirs our hearts to memory and hope, Christ who gives us strength when our strength reaches its end. And when we come to this table, Christ meets us in the meager elements we cobble together. In his hands, they become more than bread, more than juice. In this sacred act, Christ becomes known to us again, strengthening us through the power of the Holy Spirit to share God’s love and grace with the world. We need this moment to be together even as we are still separated. *We need this table.*

So, today we will take the bread and the cup. We will give thanks for them and pray God’s Holy Spirit blessing on ourselves and one another and on these gifts offered in love. We will break them as a sign of Christ’s broken body and the brokenness we experience. And we will give them to one another as Christ gave them to us, eating and drinking the presence of Christ to remember and to re-member – to put back together – the Body of Christ.

At this table, Christ will be made present to us and in us. Our sharing is a way of practicing that presence and making the ordinary holy. A moment does not become sacred by where it occurs, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Anglican priest and liturgist Percy Dearmer, who with Ralph Vaughan Williams edited the first edition of *The English Hymnal*, offered this hope in a beautiful Communion hymn: “All our meals and all our living make as sacraments of thee, that by caring, helping, giving, we may true disciples be.”<sup>2</sup>

May our eyes be opened at the table today, that we may see the Christ who is present with us, just as he has been all along. May we be reminded that whenever we proclaim the Word and gather around the table, we are keeping Christ alive in our hearts and in our witness to the world. And in his presence, may we learn to see the holy possibilities in this and every moment. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup> “Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether” appears as hymn #632 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House (1989).