

## “Can You Taste It?”

Sermon: Year B, Easter 3

Text: Luke 24:36–48

Preached: April 15, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from Jesus, the Risen One!

Are you like me? Many of my strongest memories are triggered by food. Maybe it's the taste, maybe it's the smell, maybe it's the visuals, but for some reason when I go back to relive events, my mind often calls forth the meals that I had in the course of them. If I think of Austria, I remember the little restaurant where we had this cream of garlic soup that was so good that we spent years trying to find a recipe to reproduce it. If I think of Paris, I think of this tiny restaurant in the Marais presided over by a grandmotherly Alsatian woman who went on spiritual pilgrimage to Tibet every year and who made the most incredible lemon tart. My mouth waters.

Five or six years ago, Tom and I went out to Washington, DC, for a family gathering for the memorial service for his uncle Jim, and then I stayed over to visit with old friends from the congregation where I did my parish internship. Everyone wanted to feed me, it seemed. I pretty much ate my way through the week. There were gatherings large and small, but all seemed to revolve around food. The funeral luncheon featured these outstanding barbecued ribs, dripping with a spicy-sweet sauce that made my tongue tingle. That afternoon was filled with reminiscing and telling family stories, and celebrating Jim's life. The stories and food and drink flowed abundantly. The Rowans always tell their stories around the table, to much laughter. A day later, there was this great tapas place on 14<sup>th</sup> St. that featured this crispy duck leg...the skin was crackling and mahogany brown and salty, the flesh incredibly juicy. Can you smell it? Can you taste it? And they had this cocktail that was sweetened with a little chunk of honeycomb on a skewer. I can still taste the honey as I held it to my tongue. I was the guest of two old friends and a new friend, and we talked and laughed for a few hours. And then there was the Logan Tavern on P St. with three other friends, that served this amazing lamb shank in port wine accompanied with parmesan grits, followed by warm bittersweet chocolate fudge cake. Delicious. And then there was the simple meal of sautéed scallops and salad, washed down with a crisp, cool Riesling wine, that my hostess prepared one evening, just for her daughter and me and herself, shared around their dining table in a Washington brownstone...the simplest meal, but oh, so good. We sat around that table and talked until late into the evening, discussing politics and religion, catching up on the events in our lives.

I probably should have resisted the food more than I did. I went to worship at Luther Place Memorial Church, where I had served. Across the aisle from me was a woman who kept looking at me as though she should know who I was. When it came time for passing the peace as we began yet another meal, the meal of the Eucharist, she took my hand and suddenly realized who I was, and said, “Oh, Keith! I didn't recognize you at first...you're looking so...robust!”

Now, this is not a “what I did on my vacation” sermon, or a restaurant review. There's a point here. Today's gospel reading is from the gospel of Luke. Commentators point out that throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus seems to do nothing but go to parties and dinners and to eat with people. He eats his way through Galilee. The parables in this gospel are full of banquets and wedding feasts and fatted calves roasted for celebrations. And in Luke's gospel, every time the resurrected Jesus shows up among his gathered disciples, there is food. In Luke, the resurrected Jesus is presented not as some disembodied spirit floating around, but as a very real, flesh-and-blood person who is hungry and who eats. In the part of the story immediately preceding the passage we heard today, Jesus has accompanied two of his followers along the road to Emmaus. They spend the entire afternoon with this stranger, and when they arrive at their destination, they invite him in to share the evening meal, and when Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, suddenly their eyes are opened, and they realize who he is...they truly know him in the breaking of that bread. Then he vanishes from their sight.

The two disciples rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others what they have just experienced. They no sooner arrive and tell their story to Jesus' other followers than Jesus himself appears among them. At first they are terrified, thinking they're seeing a ghost. They look at him, but don't completely recognize him. Even after he shows them the wounds in his hands and feet, and invites them to touch him and see for themselves that he is real, they're filled with joy, but they still don't entirely believe or understand what they're seeing. And so Jesus says, “Don't you have anything here to eat?” They bring him a piece of fish. Notice that the writer specifies that it is broiled

Why would he do that? I think maybe that's to appeal to our senses. Can you smell it? Fresh off the coals, a little bit of crispy char on the edges, but moist white flesh inside, flaking as it is eaten. Some ancient manuscript versions of Luke add that the disciples in the room also gave Jesus honey, right in a hunk of honeycomb. Can you taste the sweetness as that honeycomb melts on your tongue? This resurrection life that we talk about is not about floating around in heaven without bodies...it's embodied, and nourishing, and oh, so good to smell, oh, so good to taste.

But meals are not just about food. They are about companionship. The resurrected Jesus is a hungry Jesus. And Jesus is not just hungry because he has been in the tomb for three days, or as my friend Pr. Michael Coffey puts it, he's not "zombie monster flesh-eating hungry," but he's "hungry to share a meal and celebrate life; hungry to gather again with his friends; hungry for them to trust the life-giving power of God; hungry for them to become a new community of faithful, courageous living; hungry for them to break bread together and with strangers everywhere until strangers are strange no more." This hunk of broiled fish that they offer to Jesus not only demonstrates to Jesus' friends that the resurrected Jesus is real and physical and present, it becomes a tasted and smelled symbol of the love that binds them together, the love that binds *us* together, a sign of how God has gathered us and how God feeds us. In the breaking of bread together, in the eating together, their eyes are opened, and they see Jesus for who he truly is. That hunk of charred fish is an act of love.

This resurrection account in Luke was so powerful for the early Church that in many places they seem to have included fish in their celebration of the Eucharist, as part of the resurrection meal, right alongside the bread and the wine. The Eucharist didn't used to be a little hunk of bread and a tiny sip of wine. It was a real meal, a full meal, served so that all could eat and celebrate together, the bread and the wine framing the event, integrated into a meal that nourished both physically and spiritually. The people would bring loaves and pile them on the table, would bring flasks of wine, olives, cheese... That practice eventually died out, unfortunately. But a faint reminder of it lingers visually. The symbol of the fish became a sign for the resurrected Christ, and altars and church mosaics and even tombs were adorned with images of a fish, not so much as a secret code word, as some would recount it, but as a reminder of that resurrection meal. And it is no coincidence that the only miracle story that is told in all four gospels is the feeding of the crowd with those loaves and fishes, which at one point was recounted at every Eucharist. Meals matter. Feeding people matters.

Every week as we gather here in this place, we live out this resurrection story over and over again. We come as friends, as family, from the youngest to the oldest, to gather around this table to hear the scriptures and to have our minds opened to new understandings of them, just as Jesus did with the followers in this story. When we share the peace in a few moments, we will speak to one another just as Christ does, saying, "Peace be with you." We speak that peace to one another in all of our fear and doubt and disbelief, and we hear that peace spoken back to us in our own doubt and fear, mixed with unbelieving joy. As you reach to shake hands, look carefully...the hand you grasp may bear wounds. We bring food to the table, with real loaves made lovingly by the hands of disciples among us, prepared to be broken and shared.

And then we gather around the table to eat and drink, to share a meal. In the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine, we have our eyes and hearts opened to the ways that the Risen One is truly present among us, showing up to walk alongside us in our journeys along all the roads we travel, even though we do not always recognize him at first. We gather at this meal for companionship and community, to hear one another's stories of where we've seen the Risen Christ in the unexpected places in our lives, and to remind one another to look for Christ in the face of the stranger. That's why we include young and old, stranger and friend, in the meal. We eat not because we've already figured out who Jesus is...we eat so that in the breaking and eating of the bread, in the pouring and tasting of the sweet wine, Jesus can be revealed to us in new ways.

We go out from this table fed—but we also go out with Jesus' resurrection hunger, hungry for the same things that Jesus is hungry for. We go out to bring others to the banquet, to feed others both physically and spiritually, and to offer companionship and love and community. We go out to look for the Risen Christ in the face of the stranger, to know him in the breaking of the bread in all of our gatherings, in all of our eating, both at this table and at our own. We go out to break our bread and share it. We have a faith that feeds, a faith that is truly known when we share our tables and ourselves with others. We go out from this table to be witnesses to the power and reality of resurrection, real and present among us now. Can you smell it, sisters? Can you touch it, brothers? Can you taste it, children of God? Ah, so sweet. Ah, so real. AMEN