

Easter 3B

Acts 3:12-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

My father, who was raised Roman Catholic, tells me that the day he decided to leave the church came for him in college when he was waiting in line to receive Communion and as he waited, he started to think to him self about the Catholic doctrine of “transubstantiation.” This is the teaching that says that after the priest blesses the bread and wine, what we come to receive when we come up to the altar is no longer bread and wine but very literally the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

And for my father, the day came as he was waiting in line for Communion, when he asked himself, “do I really believe that what I am about to receive is actually the body and blood of Jesus Christ?” And the answer that he felt welling up within him was a resounding “no.” And so for my very rationally minded dad, this was enough to turn him around completely – to give up on all his years of religious education...things all fell apart for him like a stack of falling dominoes. He got out of line for Communion that very moment, left the church, and did not return again until just in the last few years...

The “sacrament” of Holy Communion – the meal that we share with one another each and every Sunday – is the most important thing that we do when we gather for worship but it’s also the most misunderstood. The church has probably spent too much time trying to speak about what exactly goes on in this ritual action. We’ve run ourselves around in circles passionately debating the finer points of theology while getting everyone even more confused in the process and this confusion, as in my father’s case,

can easily become a stumbling block or a barrier to one's life of faith. In our quest to put our fingers on exactly the right place, we have taken ourselves away from the experience of it all – we've lost sight of what this sacred meal can mean at its most basic and fundamental level.

It is very noteworthy that many of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus revolve around the sharing of a meal and that in both accounts that we have from the Gospel of Luke, this communal meal whether, in the breaking of bread or in the eating of a piece of fish, like in today's Gospel story, serve as an experiential way of opening up the hearts and minds of Jesus' followers to new levels of understanding and meaning – to the new reality that is breaking into their lives. The meal helps to make their faith tangible – it serves as “an outward and visible sign,” as the definition for a “sacrament” traditionally goes, of an “inward and spiritual grace.”

These stories that we have from Luke's Gospel, in fact, mirror our Sunday morning pattern of worship in very significant ways. Jesus' followers gather together and hear scripture read and talked about and a meal is shared and, in the midst of that experience, Jesus' risen presence is made real to all those gathered. This doesn't mean, as we see in this week's Gospel story, that people's doubts are taken away or that people leave feeling as if all is solved but, somehow – in some mysterious way, everyone who gathers leaves feeling strengthened and better equipped to go out and follow in Jesus' footsteps.

What we don't get from this story, or any other Gospel story in which Jesus shares a meal with his companions, are a whole lot of specifics. We don't have a neat or easy way to describe what we are supposed to believe is taking place in this meal. The stories of the last supper notwithstanding, there is certainly enough evidence to know that the sharing of a meal is considered an important

Christian practice. The emphasis, however, is on the practice and not so much on the explanation of exactly what might be going on.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion, in this sense, should be better thought of as an open invitation for all to come to “taste and see” – to come to experience God in a more tangible way as the disciples were invited to do by Jesus. A moment that pulls at us – tugs at us to keep on coming to the table together – in good times and in bad – to continue being “fed” so that we might better be able to feed those around us. This meal that we share is bigger than any explanation we could try to place upon it and ultimately is better understood through the lived experience of taking the bread and wine again and again in a community of other disciples all hoping, as we prayed today in our Collect, to come to know Jesus better in the “breaking of the bread.”

While I think most Episcopalians would not subscribe to the Catholic teaching on “transubstantiation,” I do think that most of us would say that we believe that the meal we share together is more than just a meal – more than just bread and wine. What many in our denomination would prefer to do, however, is to remain silent on trying too hard to put specifics on exactly *what* might be happening.

And this is one reason why I am very grateful to be an Episcopalian because I like the room that we are provided to appreciate the mystery of our faith and patterns of worship. We are provided the space to continually come to new understandings and levels of belief that can only come from a willingness to hang in there amidst all of our doubts and questions...

In today’s Gospel reading, just as in the doubting Thomas story from last week, the doubts and anxieties of the disciples are embraced by Jesus. He meets them right where they are and invites

them into a deeper experience – he invites them to touch, and to taste, and to feel that he is still with them.

I think my dad's faith fell apart because he got too tied up by the need for exact explanations on matters that missed the whole point of the worship experience. He also found himself in a place in which he didn't feel as though his doubts and questions would be honored. He left the church because it was never much about the experience as much as it was about rules and boundaries and borders – it was about following the path carved out for you by others instead of one that truly comes to us from God.

When we come for Communion, it should always be about the experience – about the discovery. This is why, we like to say at Christ Church, that all our welcome to receive the sacrament because who are we to stop or impede or hinder that experience? If you feel an urge to receive the bread and wine in this community, then you should come forward and do so and we can talk about the details later on. There are obviously times when receiving the sacrament will be more significant than on other occasions but, when we continue to come with open hearts and minds and with a genuine desire to encounter God, we might be surprised at what might happen.

I'd like to close this morning by reading a poem from Mary Oliver entitled, "The Vast Ocean Begins Just outside Our Church: The Eucharist."