

Sacred Sloppy Joes **April 23, 2023**

Every society has an origin story. As a country, we have the story of the American Revolution.

- We talk about George Washington and his brilliance during the Revolutionary War.
- We talk about the scraggly, scrappy militiamen defeating the well-trained British Redcoats.
- We talk about Patrick Henry's line, "Give me liberty or give me death," and Nathan Hale's "I only regret that I have one life to lose for my country."
- We talk about figures like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, the men and women of the frontier.

Those events and people are a part of the origin story, the founding story of our nation.

Every society has a story like this.

- The Romans spoke about two twins, Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome.
- The Greeks told stories of the gods on Mount Olympus giving birth to mortals and demigods.
- In Egypt, each large city had its own founding story, usually involving interactions between the sun, the earth, and water.
- Christians, Jews, and Muslims go back to Adam and Eve, who were created by God.

Every society has an origin story.

Today, we hear one of the origin stories of the Christian Church. Really, if you had to pinpoint the starting point of Christianity and what we call the Church, it is the resurrection. Up to that point, no one bothered writing down what Jesus taught and did, because while it was spectacular, the followers of Jesus made up a movement without Judaism.

But with the resurrection, that all changed. Now, the disciples and followers of Jesus had to ask themselves, "What now?" If Jesus is raised from the dead, how does that change how I live? How does that change my understanding of death?

So on Easter Sunday, we hear the beautiful story of the resurrection. In the Sundays following, we hear how the disciples (not just the 12 but everyone who followed Jesus) how the disciples respond. And we begin to form the foundation of the church.

Sure, the 11 apostles believe in the resurrection because they saw Jesus. What if you haven't seen? Faithful Thomas teaches us that that's okay. Blessed are those who have not seen Jesus and yet have come to believe.

Today, we hear a story that has shaped the church. In fact, this is one of the most formative stories that has shaped Christianity and our worship. As Deacon Midge mentioned last week, these stories describe the intimacy of Jesus and his followers.

Today we hear the story of the road to Emmaus. Two people are walking to Emmaus, Cleopas and one other person. Cleopas' sidekick (the poor guy or gal doesn't even get a name). In any case, these two people are followers of Jesus, Cleopas and Tonto, and they are *sad*, we're told.

But guess what? In the midst of that grief, Jesus shows up. That seems to be a common theme, doesn't it?

- On Easter morning, the women are terrified... and Jesus shows up.
- That evening, the disciples have locked themselves in a room because they're afraid... and Jesus shows up.
- The next week, Thomas... *questions* their story (I don't want to say the "D" word that rhymes with "route")... and Jesus shows up.
- Today, these two disciples are sad... and Jesus shows up.

We don't need to wait until we're happy and well-organized and ready to look for Jesus. Jesus is there in the mess of life.

Jesus comes and joins Cleopas and Poncho here. And to be honest, they're also a little rude to their guest! Jesus asks them what they're talking about, and they almost sneer at him, "Where have you been? Are you the only person who doesn't know about Jesus?" We'll chalk it up to their grief.

And Jesus, Cleopas, and Robin walk along, and Jesus talks with them, tells them about the scriptures. A good ol' Bible study that lasts the whole 2 or 2½ hours that they walk the 7 sevens to Emmaus.

They arrive at their destination, and being good faithful people, Cleopas and Luigi offer hospitality to Jesus, which he accepts. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it. The light bulb goes off! The two people recognize that ceremony, just as you and I might recognize that progression of words: "He took the bread, blessed it, and broke it." Oh, that's what we say during Communion!

And as soon as they realize it, Jesus disappears. We don't know why; it's a supernatural experience. I think it's because they finally realize that Jesus is there. They don't need the physical, visible Jesus anymore because Christ is with them in the act of breaking bread together.

The Cleopas and Samwise Gamgee hit the road and met up with the 11 apostles and share their news.

It's a good story – Jesus arrives, Bible Study, break bread together, then they go and share the good news. Nice progression. In fact, that sounds a lot like our worship service, doesn't it? The story of the road to Emmaus, with Cleopas and Dr. Watson, is really the foundation of our lived worship experience.

We have two halves of our service: what we call "The Liturgy of the Word," where we read the Scriptures and talk about them and describe what we believe. And then there is the Holy Eucharist, or Communion, where we break bread together.

A Lutheran pastor named Tom Irwin shared his wisdom with me this week. He said, “You can go ahead and preach for 2 hours, but no one is going to recognize Jesus until you break bread together.”

But joking aside, this story illustrates why we value Communion so highly. There is something sacred about breaking bread with others any day of the week, not just on an altar with fancy candles. When we share food with others, a relationship is formed or strengthened that is beyond words. Sharing a meal is sacred, even in the midst of being ordinary.

And at church, we simply have a bit more ceremony around the breaking of bread to make our selves more consciously of the holiness of this act. What we want to remind ourselves is the fact that when people share food, when people break bread together, love is present.

And in our faith, it’s not only love; it’s the presence of Christ. It is relationship. It is the conviction that Jesus had that everyone is worthy of love. It doesn’t matter if you’re a leper or a tax collector or a criminal or a Pharisee. You are worthy of God’s love, and Jesus illustrated that fact by eating with all those people. And he caught a lot of criticism for it.

That’s why we say that everyone is welcome to receive Communion. Because everyone deserves God’s love. Jesus ate with everyone, even those who staunchly disagreed with him. And if we believe that Jesus is present in our Eucharist, then everyone needs to be invited.

I’d like to show you one interesting (I think it’s interesting) tool that points to this story of the Emmaus road. Take out a Book of Common Prayer from your pew. It’s that strange burgundy book with a cross on the front. What on earth is this thing for? We used to use these every week before the pandemic, before we started printing our bulletins.

Turn to page 834. In the back of this book, there are prayers for all different occasions.

- You have a birthday coming up: there’s a prayer for that.
- You need rain, there is a prayer for that.
- You’re in the midst of an argument or disagreement, there’s a prayer for that.

One page 834, you’ll see that there’s a prayer for before you receive Communion. You do not need to say this prayer in order for Communion to “take,” but it’s a resource to have.

“Be present, be present, O Jesus, our great High Priest, as you were present with your disciples, and be known to us in the breaking of bread; who lives and reigns, etc.” That’s the Emmaus road story, as well as other post-Resurrection stories of Jesus being made known to his followers when he broke bread with them.

There’s also a prayer for after you receive Communion, asking Jesus to help us see him in ourselves, now that we have had this sacred meal.

Our story today gives us something to pay attention to, to notice, today during Communion, and to notice the next time you eat with someone else. Notice the bond that forms or grows when

you eat with something, intentionally, sitting down. Notice how sharing a meal is unlike anything else we do. Notice how even in the midst of the ordinary, in a meal of mac and cheese or Sloppy Joes, notice that there is something holy about being together.

That is a foundational principal of our faith. Breaking bread, breaking Sloppy Joes together is sacred. And Jesus is present in the sharing of a meal.

Amen.

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