

On Beyond Easter

B Y M I L T O N B R A S H E R - C U N N I N G H A M

The power of Christ's resurrection is realized most, not in our building of monuments or institutions, but in the breaking of the bread, the quotidian collecting of those whom we love around a table that nourishes us all, and praying God would give us new eyes to see those who belong alongside us.

The morning my father died, I drove to the nursing home where he was in hospice care soon after sunrise, trying to make sense of what had happened. When we left the building after we had said goodbye, all we knew to do was go eat together. Grief does strange things to the mind, not the least of which is to make random connections. For me, that goes from an egg hunt in the graveyard, to a hospice bed, to a children's book, and then a couple of lines from an old sermon I heard a long time ago. Bear with me.

When we lived in New England, my wife Ginger pastored North Community Church in Marshfield, Massachusetts, which originally broke off from the First Church of Plymouth — as in “The First Church.” That's right: Pilgrims and all. It was a white clapboard building with big clear windows, very few decorations except for the driftwood cross that hung at the front of the sanctuary, and a tall steeple, in keeping with good Puritan tradition. Next to it was a cemetery whose tombstones bore the names of folks who lived and died before the Revolutionary War and on down.

One of my favorite traditions at our church was the Easter Egg Hunt, which followed our Easter Sunday worship service. The young people came early to hide the eggs and then the little ones came bursting out of the sanctuary after the benediction to find the eggs — among the tombstones. Since we were just south of Boston, some of those early Easters meant they

found the eggs lying in the snow as well. The whole scene was a marvelous picture of the resurrection: the children running and laughing among the silent granite slates, some with names we remembered and some long forgotten. It was not uncommon to find one of the little gatherers perched on a gravestone stuffing her face with as much candy as possible before one of her parents caught on.

The juxtaposition of cold stones and vibrant children reminds me that the transition from Good Friday to Resurrection Morning is not 'either/or' but 'both/and'. We proclaim the resurrection in the middle of the cemetery that is our grief-colored existence, losing loved ones even as we welcome new people into our hearts. We are the walking wounded, the disconsolate, as the old hymn calls us, the ones who need to be reminded there is a love that will not let us go. For those who have had loved ones die, Easter is less certain, even as it is more necessary. "He is not here" carries both a tone of palpable absence and enduring hope.



My dad died last summer. He was almost eighty-five, so I suppose I should have seen it coming, but it was still a surprise. One day he was there, and then he was not. Now there is a stone in a cemetery that carries his name, just as I do. This Easter, I think about resurrection differently because my father is not alive. His grave is filled. He is not here and I do know where they put him. My wife's father died a little over two years ago. In the days that followed both deaths, we said more than once that we needed to get in touch with our friends whose parents died before ours and simply say, "I'm sorry. I thought I was being helpful but I had no idea how this feels."

In the days between my dad's death and his funeral, we told stories. One of my favorites came when I asked my mother why there were three or four bags of little white donuts in the pantry. "Oh," she said, "we got up every morning at seven and I fixed coffee and we had a couple of donuts and talked about what we wanted for breakfast." The story made my heart smile, because my father was one who was already thinking about the next meal any time he sat down to eat. Every gathering over food was an opportunity to dream about what was to come.

One of the Dr. Seuss books I remember best from my childhood because of how much my father loved it was called *On Beyond Zebra*. The story centers around one boy telling his younger friend how much more he could imagine if he refused to be confined by the prescribed alphabet: there were words and worlds to discover if one kept going "on beyond zebra." Dad read it as a metaphor of faith. He was on to something.

"In the places I go there are things that I see
That I *never* could spell if I stopped with the Z.

I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
My alphabet starts where *your* alphabet ends!"†



I do not often remember sermons. I remember snippets, but rarely the whole arc. Some of those snippets have hung with me for years in a deeply meaningful way. A couple of decades ago, the senior pastor at our church in Winchester, Massachusetts, used the opening sentence of Mark's gospel as his text: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

"This sentence," he said, "is not as much an introduction to the book as it is a title. The story of Jesus' life is the beginning of the gospel; it continues with us." Easter proves his point. Jesus' resurrection is not the culmination of the story, but the beginning.

The way the Gospel writers offer us the chance to see on beyond Easter, and the way they tell the story, Jesus started by doing something after the resurrection he had not done before: he cooked. He endured the cross and the grave, came back from the dead, and made breakfast (John 21). The meal is no small matter. Jesus had made three or four other appearances to those whom he loved. He spoke with Mary in the grave yard (John 20:11-18), walked with two disciples along the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-35), and showed up twice in the room where everyone was gathered (John 20:19-29).

Each time, including our fishing story, they did not recognize him at first.

Things were not as they had been before his death. He was alive, yes, but they were not hanging out or taking trips together. He was not with them all the time. And Easter had not erased the grief. They were all indelibly marked by his crucifixion and all that had happened around it. Judas was dead. They were confused, at best. When Peter

said, "I'm going fishing," he was grasping for some sense of normalcy: I'll go do what I know how to do. The ritual of daily work—the stuff in their bones—offered a way to try and make some sense of all that was swirling around them. They fished all night, casting their nets into the dark waters.

Who knows why they did not catch anything. Maybe they should not have been out there at night. Maybe they were just going through the

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motions and were not doing it well. Maybe the fish were asleep. The futility of their enterprise is excruciating. They were out in the middle of the night slinging nets into the darkness, as though that will somehow make things better, just as they had tried hiding in the room together and who knows what else. Nothing worked. Things were not as they had been and they could not be fixed. It was never going to be like that again. There was *before*; this was *after*. They did not yet have the rituals of the Church to comfort them. There were no chapels to go to, no Communion to share. They only knew of their last supper with him and that things had not been right since. They had run out of letters in their alphabet of hope. So they went fishing.

Then they heard a voice call out from the shore, asking if they had caught anything. When they reported their failure, he told them to cast the net on the other side of their little boat. They had nothing to lose, so they followed the instructions that came out of the fading darkness and the breaking dawn and came up with a net so full as to almost capsize their vessel. Peter said, "It's the Lord." No one, it seems, had recognized who was calling out to them until that moment. He dropped his net and put on his tunic and swam to shore, where he found Jesus cooking fish on the beach over an open fire.

Mark noted that Peter had been fishing naked; now he was stripped bare by Jesus' questions: "Simon, do you love me?" "Simon, do you love me?" "Simon, do you love me?"

Maybe it did matter that the last time a charcoal fire showed up in the story, Peter was in the courtyard denying that he had anything to do with Jesus; or, perhaps, he had been around one of those fires at every meal since. Maybe it did matter that Jesus served bread and fish, much like the lunch the little boy had offered when they ended up feeding over five thousand people and had baskets and baskets of leftovers; or, perhaps, they ate fish at most every meal. Maybe it mattered that they caught one hundred and fifty three fish; or, perhaps, they just caught as many as the net would hold. Maybe it mattered that Jesus asked Peter if he loved him three times – as many times has Peter had betrayed him; or, perhaps, it mattered, mostly, that Jesus made breakfast and fed his friend who had disowned him, offering him the grace to know his betrayal was not the last word. There was something on beyond the courtyard, the cross, and the cemetery, even on beyond the fretful and fruitless night they had just lived through.



The Gospel writers offer us two incredibly important meals that happen within a week of each other. One we mark regularly; the other gets less notice. The Last Supper became the Lord's Supper and has become for many Christians both primary meal and metaphor. It is the one thing that happens across denominational and cultural divides. We have come to the Table in

an unbroken line since that night when Jesus first broke the bread and poured the wine and said, "As often as you do this, remember me."

"Remember." In this case let us hear the word not as the opposite of forget, but as the opposite of dismember: we come to the table to put ourselves back together in Jesus' name. We re-member the Body of Christ as we share the bread and wine, which is an ongoing and difficult task. As the story unfolded that last night when Jesus and the disciples gathered together in the upper room, they fell apart almost before supper was over. Judas went to tell the authorities how to find Jesus; Peter ended up in the courtyard, doing his best to follow Jesus, but then denied even knowing who Jesus was; the others scattered, leaving the women standing with him at the end. For all the parables and promises, the future looked bleak. The disciples were overcome with grief and shock. They were alone and unsure, wondering, perhaps, if they had spent their lives on the wrong person.

In much the same way I did not understand grief until my father died, I am not sure we can truly feel the weight of that week between the last supper and that last breakfast. Our Lenten observances take us through solemn services and vigils from Thursday night to Saturday, but we have already hired the trumpeters for Sunday morning and have the eggs dyed and decorated. We are not grieving, we are observing and waiting. We know what's coming. They did not. Even after they knew the tomb was empty, they were sitting in the dark, alone and afraid with no idea what to do next. Jesus was not anywhere to be found. He spoke to Mary in the graveyard and made a couple of visits to the upper room, but things were not like they had been. And then Jesus met them on the beach, asking them to remember once more. In both meals, Jesus is the host: he served the Supper and he cooked the breakfast. He was the one creating the space, setting the table, feeding his friends, offering what they needed most. If Communion remembers his death – "we proclaim his death until he comes" – then might the breakfast on the beach proclaim his resurrection? And, if so, what does it proclaim?

A glance through a few commentaries on John's telling of that meal on the beach, and it is apparent we are digging for meaning in most every detail: from the Greek verbs Jesus used for love, to the last time there was a charcoal fire, to the number of fish they caught. We have had a couple of millennia to parse most every turn of phrase. If we get too close to the painting, however, we may miss the big picture and see only brush strokes. With all the days together, it seems safe to say they ate together as much as they did anything else. Some of the meals made the Gospels, but most were just daily bread: the sharing of sustenance as they went about their lives and work.

In the specific person of Jesus, God says, "Me, too" in a way that had not been said before. The stories in the Gospels are full of specifics: Jesus making particular movements, though not spectacular ones, to offer

compassion and healing. He stopped when the woman with the hemorrhage touched his coat. He asked Zacchaeus if he could come over to the house. He wrote in the sand to take the attention off the adulterous woman for at least a moment. He offered Peter breakfast.



The first building blocks of our faith were around tables, over meals—and all the messing meaning that implies. We are called to feed one another, to heal one another, to come together right now over food. By the time we see the beginnings of the Church in Acts, sharing food and eating together has become central to their identity and practice.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:46-47

Our faith calls us to go on beyond Communion, on beyond the cross, on beyond the empty tomb, to meet each other for breakfast, lunch, and dinner to re-member to keep looking for new words and worlds to describe the indefatigable love of God that breathed us into being, holds us as we walk through these days, and welcomes us when we move beyond this life. We are called to come to the same table. We take our turn as we feed one another, and as we feed the world. The early church gathered for their love feasts, sharing food from house to house, as Acts points out. Whatever they had to do, they knew they had to eat, and so they fed one another. “As often as you do this” might mean more than simply observing the Lord’s Supper. What if Jesus had in mind that we would re-member every time we broke bread or sat down at the table together? What if Jesus was calling us to widen our sense of every table to include those who harvested the crops and raised the animals, and to make sure they are paid fairly and treated justly?

Here is the story of the Easter breakfast: Jesus was back at work, remembering those whom he loved, feeding them, forgiving them, and calling them to go and do likewise. Paul admonished the Corinthians to come to the Lord’s Table clear in heart and mind. If there were things that needed to be set right, set them right before supper. What if all our meals were markers—altars of forgiveness and belonging? We don’t do well to digest all that we carry around. Come to the table. Lay down your burdens. Offer forgiveness. Ask for it, too. And bring anyone else you can find. Christ is risen!—pass the potatoes.

The power of Christ’s resurrection is realized most, not in our building of monuments or institutions, not in our grand schemes and fantastic

programming, but in the breaking of the bread, the quotidian collecting of those whom we love around a table that nourishes us all, and praying God would give us new eyes to see those who belong alongside us. How do we expand the Communion table to include every table? How do we make sure everyone has a table and food to put on it? How does every meal become part of the story of our redemption, our sustenance? How do we hear the call to feed the sheep?

If Communion is the meal that galvanizes us, then perhaps the breakfast on the beach is the meal that reminds us who we are and who we are called to be, and reminds us Easter is the beginning of the Gospel, not the final chapter. Go out into the highways and byways of life, to the bars and the beaches, go out on beyond Easter and compel them to come to breakfast. “Feed my sheep” – even Jesus used the meal as a metaphor: you know what it feels like to completely screw up; you know what it feels like to feel hungry for hope; you know what it feels like to be fed by grace, to be loved back into being. Now go do that for someone else. Get cooking.

NOTE

† Dr. Seuss, “On Beyond Zebra!” (New York: Random House, 1955), 5.



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