

April 19, 2015

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Luke 24:36-48

Earth Day

If you ask what jumps out first in today's gospel story, I would say the broiled fish. I'm intrigued by this mention of what was on the menu that evening, not long after Easter morning, when the disciples got together, fearful and unsure about all that's happened and what they should do about it. Suddenly, the resurrected Jesus appears. He explains the scriptures and then asks for something to eat. That's when we learn what they had that night for dinner: broiled fish, and that there were leftovers—which was a good thing, because Jesus was hungry.

He had to be hungry, if you think of the story just prior to the one today. In fact, today's story really isn't a stand-alone story, it's the continuation of the story just prior to it. The two stories are linked by a phrase, the first sentence of today's reading, "while they were still speaking." While they were speaking with whom? About what? "While they were still speaking" refers to the report of disciples, who were telling the other disciples about what happened to them on a trip out of town. More about menus, about food, in that story, a story about a walk to Emmaus, and what happened at Emmaus, at a dinner table.

In that story, these two disciples were walking towards Emmaus, and talking, feeling fearful and uncertain about all that had happened the sad and scary and strange events from the past few days, the events around Jesus, whom they had hoped would save Israel, but who had been killed. Now there were reports that he had risen from the dead, and appeared to some disciples. As these two disciples walked and talked, unsure what to make of all this, another person appeared. It was Jesus—but they didn't know it was Jesus, not at first. He came to them, as one unknown. He walked and talked with them along the way. Then they invited him in to dinner and he came in and sat down at the table with them. He took the bread, and blessed it, and broke it. Suddenly, they recognized him. Just as suddenly he disappeared—apparently without any dinner!

The two disciples run back to tell everyone else what happened. "While they were still speaking," Jesus appears. Still the disciples are frightened and doubtful. They are still not sure what to make of these stories of resurrection, even as they are looking at the resurrected Jesus, standing right in front of them. Even as they look with joy, while they are looking with joy, the story says, they are disbelieving and still wondering. And then Jesus asks for something to eat.

If you ask Biblical scholars about the broiled fish, about why Jesus asks for it and eats it, it's not because he's hungry—thought he certainly has reason to be, with all he's been through. If you ask Biblical scholars about the broiled fish, they say it's there to dispel fear, do away with doubt and confusion, show he's not a ghost. That's what Jesus himself says, when he first appears. "I have flesh and bones. A ghost does not." And so then he does something ghosts don't do: he has something to eat.

We're going to have something to eat today after church. It's not broiled fish. We're having special treats after church to mark Earth day, which is coming up this week on Wednesday and which prompted the Worship Team to plan a special emphasis on creation this Sunday. Being the kind of church that we are, this includes eating. I saw some e-mails about proposed treats, some of which had environmental sounding names. I'm wondering if the intriguing "Dirt Cake" is still on the menu.

Earth Day, as the partners in ministry section of the bulletin says, began being celebrated in 1970. It's now a worldwide effort to raise awareness about what's going in the world to the world—to the air, and water, and animals, and plants—to the environment, or in church language: to creation. In the worship service a little later on we'll hear more about our community garden, how it started, why it's there. Throughout the worship service you can listen for creation themes in the liturgy—in the prayers and in the hymns. For example, in the hymn that we sang at the beginning of worship, "All Creatures Worship God Most High." I find that hymn's lyrics intriguing. Here we are in church, singing about brother sun and sister moon, mother earth. If you ask when it was written, you might think the 1970s. Actually, it was written not the 1970s, but more like the 1270s, for its author is Francis of Assisi. In the Catholic tradition, Francis is the saint known for his love of animals and the natural world. Stories are told of Francis preaching to both people and to beasts, preaching to birds even, who all eagerly quieted down to hear him. (I'm still working on the people part of that.) Of course, the point of those stories is the point of many psalms. Francis reminds us of the ability, the capacity, the duty, of all creatures, of all creation, to worship God.

Francis came up in an article I recently read about the environment, an article written by the author Jonathan Franzen. Franzen has an incredibly dour view of the environmental movement—not because he doesn't love nature; like St. Francis, Franzen is an impassioned bird lover. Franzen's less than sunny disposition is about our current situation, about our confusion about how to care for the earth, about all we are doing and not doing—and what that's doing to the planet. The facts Franzen cites are sobering—both about the severity of the problem, and the ineffectiveness of our response. For example, Franzen says, if you ask how we can limit global warming to two degrees this century, people will have to drastically change their life style. So that the earth will only heat up by two degrees, for the rest of this century, a person's annual allotment of greenhouse gas emissions will need to be the amount a typical American single-family home uses in two weeks. We have set a destructive trajectory for the planet, Franzen says. A day is coming for the Earth, the Day of Judgement. The world is going to end in fire, and we are the ones bringing it on.

I read reports like these, follow debates about pipelines, think about my two car household, see all the trash I create... The environmental crisis is so large, and yet so hard to get a handle on. It leaves us confused and frightened, unsure of all that's happened and what we are to do about it... like the disciples, in the gospel today.

"Have you anything to eat?" Jesus asks. We have plenty to be scared about, but God is not a ghost. God became flesh and blood, and overcame death, and is alive in the world. He comes to us, often unknown and unrecognized. Suddenly he appears: in a meal, in food prepared for and given to you. He appears in conversations, with brothers or sisters in Christ. As we talk, fearful and unsure, we gather and we see, hear, witnesses of hope. He appears, when we engage in this fragile, beautiful world, when we love and care for it, and for those who share it with us.

This is the example of St. Francis, that article said, to love what's concrete and vulnerable and right in front of us. Or, in the words of a saint of sorts of the Lutheran tradition: "If you ask what I would do," Luther said, "If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, still today I would plant a tree!"