

Easter 3, Yr B, 042212  
All Saints Episcopal Church

"They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence."

What is it about food and our connection to it? We know we need to eat in order to have all the vitamins and minerals that our bodies need to thrive. We eat when we're hungry, to satisfy a physical need. Sometimes we eat when we're not hungry, usually to satisfy an emotional need. But many times the main reason we eat is because we are enjoying the company of others.

If there is a celebration at hand, it is best accomplished with food. If there is a meeting to go to, snacks make it go more smoothly. If there is money to be solicited, having something to eat makes it easier to convince people to donate. If someone has died, food gives us something to do with our hands and something to talk about to break the tension of the situation.

In Holy Scriptures, there are countless stories about meals prepared and shared: Abraham and Sarah fed strangers who were messengers from God; God provided daily breakfast for Moses and the wandering Israelites; Jesus turned a boy's sack lunch into a meal for 5000 folks; he provided wine for a wedding feast and ate at with some of the prominent Jewish leaders of his time as well as some of the poorest; and a loaf of bread and a cup of wine became a last meal for Jesus and his followers.

In the arts, there are also countless depictions of meals prepared and shared: the Last Supper may be the most popular meal ever painted, but think about meals in movies you have seen. There is the lavish dinner in *Babette's Feast*, the communion service in *Places in the Heart*, all those meals where Helen Hunt waited on Jack Nicholson in *As Good As It Gets*.

And let's not forget supper clubs, potluck suppers, Lenten Suppers, parish cookouts and the feast after the Easter Vigil.

What do all those meals have in common? It's not really the food itself. Just bread and a little bit of fish at one meal does not really compare with the fresh cakes

and roasted lamb of another. It's like the difference between a stale cheese sandwich and a gourmet meal at a 5-star restaurant. But what any of these meals has in common with every other meal, is, instead, community. It is the sharing of the meal, the eating of the meal together, that makes the meal such a memorable one - whether it is a celebratory meal or a meal borne of grief and sadness.

Relationship - being in community with others - is what changes a meal from just the ingesting of vitamins and minerals to an act of sacrifice and love - preparing and sharing that which sustains us physically in the context of an opportunity to sit at table together to enjoy each other -- that is, to be together 'with joy.'

One commentator on this Sunday's gospel lesson suggests that Easter might not be an early morning visit to an empty tomb -- a one-time event that is over in a few minutes and not thought about again until next year -- but a celebration around a table, a multi-course meal in which we experience resurrection by eating together.

In today's reading of part of Luke's version of the Easter story, we skip the first part of the chapter, which is the story of Cleopas and another of Jesus' followers telling the disciples how they met Jesus on the way to Emmaus, and how they recognized him when he broke bread with them. All of a sudden (and here is where our reading today picks up) - all of a sudden, there was Jesus in their midst again. When he asked for something to eat they gave him some fish and he ate it. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. Could it be that he was reminding them of an earlier time when he served all those people with bread and fish -- enough for all to be satisfied and with leftovers as well? This could have been a foretaste of the feast that Jesus will serve "when the reign of God comes in all its fullness. Surrounded by people of every time and every place, surrounded by all of creation, Jesus will serve up the great and promised feast, the final course of Jesus' resurrection banquet. No one will be hungry; all will be satisfied. The last will be first and the first will be last, and the feasting will continue forever."

And the other meals that Jesus was part of, or was served - is it possible that his eating and drinking with the poor, the outcast and the despised are part of this movable but unending resurrection feast? We have heard here before that the translation of the Greek word for resurrection means 'to stand with dignity.' Jesus certainly resurrected people, raised them at these meals to stand with dignity, brought them to new life. Does that mean, then, that this Jesus, now risen from

the dead, is present at every table, bringing new life to every table at which "the hungry are filled, the despised are loved, the outcast are welcome and the poor receive the reign of God?" I think so.

It is said that there are no coincidences with God, that everything is part of the plan. I'm not sure that I buy that totally, but several things occurred this week that might push me more toward believing it!

First of all, on Thursday the staff all got to eat lunch together when Burl Ratcliffe, one of the Thursday office volunteers, made a fabulous lunch for all of us. The food was delicious, but the chance to sit together in a moment of relaxation and conversation was a treat also. We talked about a variety of things, including movies we've seen that have stuck with us over the years. One was 'Places in the Heart,' a movie from 1984 left me sobbing all the way home from the theater. It did the same thing to Jim! And for the same reason: the last scene.

The movie is set in Texas in the depression of the 1930's, where a woman is widowed when her husband, the Sheriff, dies in an accident, leaving her to figure out how to make enough money from their farm to pay the mortgage and raise their kids. When an itinerant black man comes along with an idea of how to work the cotton crop, she hires him; when the bank manager is less than helpful in providing her with a loan, he 'convinces' her to take in his nephew as a boarder, a man who was blinded in World War I.

Accompanying this epic tale are threats from the Ku Klux Klan, infidelity between a husband and wife, tornadoes, and other disasters that befall this woman and her extended family. People die; people move away. But in the very last scene, it is Sunday, and the church doors are open as the congregation is singing. Then the preacher gets up and reads the scripture that is his text for the day; it is the text from First Corinthians about love being patient and kind.

Then it is time for communion. The choir sings as the ushers pass around the plates with the communion bread and the trays with the individual glasses of grape juice. The audience watches the people take a piece of bread, and then a cup - first the front row, then the second, and when the camera moves to the third row, these are the faces: the blind man; the black man who had been beaten by the Klan and had left town, his face free of bruises and scars; the children; their mother; and then

the husband-Sheriff; and the young back man who was involved in the accident that had killed the Sheriff. All of them, together at the feast.

And here's the second coincidence: I spent a good deal of time on Friday trying to find that movie in the iTunes Store, on cable with On Demand, every way I could think of, so that I could watch the whole thing again and refresh my memory. No luck. But yesterday, after Food Share and breakfast, I went home and turned on the TV, scrolling through the listings. And there it was, with only 30 minutes left to go. I pushed the OK button.

After it was over, I thought about how here at All Saints we invite all people - everyone - to receive communion, because we believe that God does not limit who can sit at table in God's kingdom.

It does not matter who you are. Poor or rich, despised or beloved, male or female, black or white, gay or straight, disabled or able-bodied, young or old -- no matter what or who or how you are, God loves all of us and has raised us all to a new life of dignity. And we share with each other in a meal at this table, in the fellowship of breakfast in Stirling Hall and in the fellowship of our gathering after the 10:30 service. All part of the Easter Feast. All part of our new life.

The third coincidence is this: The last time I preached on this Third Sunday of Easter in Year B was in 2009. On that particular Sunday at the 10:30 service, we welcomed Kealen Conte into the body of Christ and the community of All Saints. He was about 9 months old at the time and had had a difficult life up until then. Jim had baptized him in the hospital NICU when he was born, and many things were touch-and-go for Kealen and Chris and Emily. By April of the next year, he was stable enough to come to church and we needed to celebrate that.

We did not baptize him again. But his parents and godparents declared their intention to raise Kealen in the life and faith of Christ. We all renewed our baptismal vows and welcomed him into the household of God. And then, as we will do in a few minutes, we shared a meal together at God's table - people raised to stand with dignity - part of the Easter feast that brings us ever closer to the completion of God's reign on earth.

Kealen will be 4 in August.

Whenever I give Kealen communion, or any other young child, I think of people who say we shouldn't give communion to children because they don't understand what it is about. I have two answers for that comment: first, that I doubt that any of us adults would be any better able to explain what is happening at the altar rail than a child would. And second, when I see the joy on the faces of the children who come to the rail, I understand that they DO know what is going on, and that you and I, if we ever knew it, have let ourselves forget it as we became serious grown-ups -- because that's what we are supposed to do.

Last week Chris carried Kealen up the aisle to the rail to receive communion. As I was putting a piece of bread in Kealen's mouth, I dropped it. But Kealen laughed, an unmistakably big laugh, as if to say, "Silly Mary! Try it again!" And we all laughed together.

So let's all try it again today, participating in this feast with smiles on our faces, as if it were the very first time. And let us thank God for the new life that has been given to us. AMEN.