

## "BREAKFAST ON THE BEACH"

John 21:1-14

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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It was thirty-two years ago, my senior year of seminary in Princeton, NJ, when I turned thirty. It was a Friday, and I did what I did most Fridays- spent the afternoon at my Field Education site, the Mercer Medical Center in Trenton, NJ where I was a chaplain intern. I was looking forward to dinner out with three of my friends- Mary Kate, Pam, and Jamie- to celebrate my birthday. I returned to our dorm, Alexander Hall, after my shift at the hospital and we piled into the car to go for supper. We were all wearing nice clothes in anticipation of a good meal at a special restaurant.

I didn't know where we were going but I realized at one point that we had been driving for longer than I expected. I asked where we were going and they said, "You are going to love this place!" The longer we drove the more annoyed I got. I wanted to know where we were going, and they just smiled.

We finally stopped in a little town, in a deserted parking lot behind an empty building. I was really confused! They got out of the car, opened the trunk, and pulled out a duffel bag with clothing in it. Turns out they had borrowed a master key, went into my dorm room while I was at the hospital and packed jeans, a sweatshirt, a coat, and sneakers for me. They each had a change of clothing as well. We changed clothes in the car- don't ask. Then we drove a bit farther--- and there was the ocean. We had arrived at the Jersey Shore. But instead of a restaurant - they had planned dinner on the beach. My friends unloaded the trunk- they had a small grill, bags of groceries, chairs, and a boom box with some of my favorite music on the cassette tapes (remember those?) they had also borrowed from my dorm room.

As the sun set on that windy April evening, we sat in beach chairs and feasted on salad, grilled steaks, and baked potatoes- all a bit crunchy from the sand that blew all over our food- but it is one of the best meals I have ever had. I think there was a cake in there too- probably chocolate! We laughed and talked and danced and listened to the waves crash on the shore- it was a perfect celebration!

I will always remember my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday because of what my friends did to help me celebrate. They went to a lot of effort to make it happen. They planned, kept secrets, shopped, and cooked- just for me. I am still overwhelmed by their kindness and generosity. And I will never forget that night.

In our text at the end of John's Gospel we find the story of another generous, gracious meal on the beach prepared and served with love. Let's think for a minute about what the disciples of Jesus have experienced in the past few weeks. At the beginning of the week of Passover celebrations, they entered the holy city of Jerusalem with Jesus, singing praises and waving branches as he rode on a borrowed colt. They followed him into the temple and watched as he did the unthinkable- overturning the tables of the merchants in the marketplace. They cheered as he won argument after argument with the religious leaders. They shared an unusual Passover meal with him where he shocked them by washing their feet. They fell asleep as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane but woke with horror when he was arrested after a kiss on the cheek from one of their own. They followed and watched from a distance as he was beaten and dragged into a sham trial. They heard Peter deny even knowing him, and then hid in disbelief as he was executed on the cross.

How much can the human spirit take in one week? But the emotional overload wasn't over yet- on Sunday came the unbelievable news that not only was the tomb empty, but Jesus was actually alive again! John's Gospel records four appearances of the resurrected Christ to his disciples. The first is Sunday at dawn, near the tomb when Jesus calls out Mary's name and she recognizes him. The second was that same evening when he met the disciples in a locked room and offered them peace and the breath of the Holy Spirit. The third came a week later when he appeared again behind closed doors to greet Thomas who missed his first visit. And now, the fourth visit occurs not in Jerusalem, but 70 miles away in Galilee.

After all that they had experienced- what would you do next? They made the long journey back home and did what they knew how to do. They went fishing. It is exactly what several of them were doing when Jesus first called out to them and invited them to join him three years earlier.

Peter takes the lead again and six others go with him. They fish from their boat all night- tossing their heavy nets over the side again and again with nothing to show for their backbreaking labors. At daybreak some smart aleck on the beach calls out to them. "Hey kids, have you caught anything?" Never a good question to ask a bunch of exhausted fishermen who have just spent a long, hard night working and still have an empty boat. Then he called out a suggestion. "Why don't you try the other side?" Can you imagine what the guys in the boat were thinking? "Yea, buddy, we'll try the other side." But they did and the water erupted with a swirling mass of fish. Their net was stuffed to the gills.

That was the moment when one of the disciples, possibly John, looked at the figure on the beach and said to Peter, "I know that guy! That is Jesus!" And Peter, good, old impetuous Peter, pulled his clothes on, jumped into the water, and made a beeline for the shore.

When they all arrived on the shore, they did indeed find Jesus and he was making breakfast- for them. He asked them to add some of their miraculous catch- which totaled 153 fish, by the way. For centuries biblical scholars have tried to find meaning in the number 153. But I think John was just telling us that it was a humongous catch! Another example of the abundant, extravagant, outrageous generosity of Jesus.

There is so much made of the **Last** Supper, but why doesn't the church talk more about the **First** Breakfast. Jesus greeted his disciples on the beach, cooked them breakfast and then served them bread and fish. The last meal they had eaten together was supper on that dark night when he was arrested, that was a part of their old life. Now here they were, at the dawning of a bright new morning, eating the first meal of the day, the first meal of their new life.

What is it with Jesus and food? Throughout his ministry he was constantly feeding people, eating with people, and being criticized for it. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, *"Maybe it is because eating is so necessary for life, and so is he. Or maybe it is because sharing food is what makes us human. There is always the chance, when we are eating together, that we will discover the risen Lord in our midst."*

We have missed many things while we have been physically apart this year- one of those things we have missed as a congregation is sharing meals together- whether it is fellowship time with coffee and snacks after worship, our simple love feast meal, or a potluck. I don't really think it is the food that we are missing so much- we can eat at home. I think it is the company- the fellowship around the tables, the laughter, the sharing, the smiles, the favorite recipes, serving each other, watching the children chase each other around the fellowship hall. It has been a long thirteen months apart.

And we **will** be together again, it may be a month or a few months- but we will be together again. And we will share meals again and we will find the Risen Christ in our midst each and every time.

As the disciples sat on the beach around that fire and ate breakfast with Jesus that morning, no doubt they were remembering another miraculous meal eaten in the same place a couple of years earlier. On that day, Jesus fed a crowd of thousands with a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread. Wherever Jesus showed up there was always enough, more than enough. For everyone. Enough bread. Enough fish. Enough forgiveness. Enough love. Enough mercy.

The disciples had had a long, hard night- in fact, they had experienced several hard weeks- and the risen Christ met them where they were and fed them- physically and spiritually. He provided sustenance for their bodies and for their souls. His presence revived them and gave them hope and direction for the future. Once again, they recognize him, and he transforms their lives.

Breakfast on the beach shows us that the promise of Easter isn't just some theological doctrine about life after death- it is a lived experience of meeting Jesus, of intimacy with the Risen Christ. It is all about relationship- with Jesus and with God. After he walked out of the tomb Jesus didn't give his disciples a quiz about his teachings or a list of rules and regulations to memorize- he gave them himself- he gave them his very presence. And he gave them food. He gave them what they needed to live and to thrive. If all he wanted to do was to reassure them, he could have sent an angel messenger to tell them that he was alive and well. But he didn't. He met them himself where they were.

What changed their lives and what changes ours is the living presence of Jesus; it is fellowship with the Risen Christ. It is life together in the community of faith. If this year of pandemic has shown us anything, I think it has shown us how much we want to be together. It has been a tough year in many ways, and it isn't quite over yet. The things we have sacrificed- worshiping together, sharing meals- have helped to keep us and others alive and well. Because of that it has been worth it.

Resurrection is a wonderful thing, but the downside is that for resurrection to occur- something first has to die. New life grows where something has been lost. We tend to focus on what we have lost. Richard Lischer says that the Easter story reminds us that "*God has chosen sides; God has chosen life- even in a pandemic, maybe especially in a pandemic.*"

In this moment in time when people with COVID are struggling to breathe, in this moment when the world watches in horror as another person of color takes their last breath at the hands of law enforcement, in these moments the Risen Christ comes to us and offers us peace and the breath of life, the breath of the Holy Spirit.

Just because Christ has risen doesn't mean the world is suddenly trouble-free. We don't celebrate Easter Sunday then walk out into a world that is free of violence and poverty and oppression and hatred. The terrifying prospect of Easter is that God called the followers of Jesus to return to the very same world that crucified Jesus- but they returned, with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God and an abundance of love. The world doesn't change after Easter- but we do.

We stand at the empty tomb as transformed people just as the disciples stood on that beach with Jesus, He didn't just show up to cater breakfast. He came to them for a purpose- he always has a purpose. The Risen Christ came to send the disciples on their way, to send them out into the world with the good news of God's love, the good news of the resurrection, with hope for a transformed world. After having breakfast with Jesus, frail and fallible human beings are strengthened for the journey ahead.

The post-Easter world looks a great deal like the pre-Easter world, but we know the difference. The difference is that the Risen Christ has intruded into our world and suddenly everything explodes in wonder, miracle, and extravagant abundance. Jesus meets us where we are- in our quarantine routines, in the line for vaccinations, in our online work and school and worship. He meets us in our grief and in our joy, in our weeping and in our laughter. He meets us where we are and he says, "Come and have some breakfast. There is enough for everyone. There is always enough!"

A character in one of Flannery O'Connor novels says, "*Jesus done thrown everything out of kilter.*"

Yes, he has. He surely has!

Thanks be to God! He has!

Amen.

("Breakfast on the beach" video clip- Ted & Company Theaterworks)