

Luke 24:44-53 (NRSV)

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

## Joy in Solid Food

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Luke 24:44-53

Just before Jesus is betrayed, Peter promises never to leave his master. But Jesus tells Peter that before daybreak he will deny he knows him three times. It is a familiar, heartbreaking passage. Peter hears from the one he loves more than anyone else in the world that in the end he will fall away and leave him to suffer trial and torturous execution utterly alone. Peter can hardly believe his ears. He left family and home to follow Jesus. He has been with Jesus from the Galilee to the Dead Sea to the hills of Judea. Yet within a few short hours Jesus' most damning prediction will come to pass.

But in this conversation, this conversation in which Jesus predicts Peter will fall away and Peter assures Jesus of his devotion, Jesus says something I have hardly noticed before. Jesus says, "You, when once you have turned back (or once you have changed) strengthen your brothers. Jesus gives us a glimpse of the future that we hardly notice and which Peter didn't hear at all. Once you have changed, once you have turned back, once you have been made new, you, Peter, will strengthen the other disciples. As in Matthew, Jesus says Peter will lead Jesus' followers in the days ahead.

It's easy to miss this brief interjection. It's even easier to miss how extraordinary it is.

Up until this point Peter, and the others, have had Jesus as their flesh and blood companion. He has been with them constantly. He has taught them and corrected them on a daily basis. And if honesty were to prevail, one would have to say that the schooling has not gone all that well. On the mountain Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah, but when Jesus said, yes, that's true, and the Messiah must suffer and die, Peter could not accept it. Even as Jesus taught them that the loathed Samaritan who rescued the beaten stranger from the ditch should be their role model, they would often argue among themselves as to which one of them was the greatest. If Jesus had been up for tenure, his teaching file would have said, "Learning assessments reveal that his students fail to understand the basic content of his courses. Limited ability to convey ideas."

But, of course, the fault didn't lie with the teacher in this case. Jesus was pretty clear. But his students were subject to human frailties. Jesus' disciples wanted to get from life, well, the things they wanted. They followed Jesus, and to this following they brought expectations. If they followed him, things were supposed to turn out the way they wanted them. Jesus would change the world. They would be rewarded in heaven and on because they followed him. They could accept a little conflict with the authorities. They could applaud his stories about compassion for the lowest in society. But they couldn't accept a defeated Jesus. They could not accept failure at that magnitude.

And so Jesus, understanding his disciples in this matter, rather matter-of-factly told Peter, you will fall away when my defeat comes. It was an easy prediction. From a hundred miles away you could see that Peter would leave when the chips were down. Of course, most people would. What seems much more extraordinary to me, though, is that in the same breath that Jesus predicted Peter's betrayal, he said, "Once you have changed, strengthen your brothers." Jesus casually gave Peter an injunction, and in it was embedded a tantalizing flicker of redemption—once you have changed, he tells Peter.

As we know well, the next couple of days were catastrophic for Jesus and his band of followers. Just about the worst imaginable outcome suddenly and brutally unfolded. Jesus was arrested, tortured and executed in the span of less than twenty-four hours. The disciples did fall away. The Gospels give various accounts of the numb demoralization the disciples experienced in the aftermath—they cowered behind locked doors, aimlessly left town, tossed to and fro by a hundred conflicting reports that his body was missing from the tomb.

The worst things they could imagine had happened, and they couldn't imagine how they could go on. It is a very prevalent human experience. The loss of a relationship, a job, a loved one, a beloved pet, one's youth, or one's physical abilities. None of us escape these losses, and many of them come abruptly or with unthinkable horror, and many of them leave us inconsolable. They leave us wondering how we can possibly go on. We all know the disciples' numb emptiness, their sleep-walking in a disoriented daze. At one point or another we experience them, too.

The disciples did not know how they could go on. They thought they would die from the grief and disappointment. But they didn't. They didn't die. They woke up the next day, and the next. It didn't feel good. Every morning there was a moment, before they came to their senses, that things seemed normal. But soon their situation washed over them, and the pit in their stomach returned. And yet, they did not die. And they kept waking up. And even as they barred themselves behind locked doors or stumbled out of town without direction and purpose, they had to begin to admit to themselves that this worst thing that they could imagine, that had happened to them, had not killed them. At first, perhaps they were not sure they wanted to be alive. But gradually, for better or worse, they came to see that they had withstood what they had thought they could not.

This new situation began to have an unanticipated impact. Their Utopian dream had gone up in smoke, and so they no longer needed to cling to it, no longer needed to close off anything that would threaten it, no longer needed to hear only what they wanted to hear. Two of them going out of town could hear, really hear for the first time, Jesus' teachings. Those huddled in a locked room could receive him even through the walls. Those at the tomb could begin to imagine that they stood in the presence of a mystery as well as loss. This losing everything, this holding on for dear life to things the way wanted them only to see them pried from their fingers, had ironically lowered their defenses. They had already lost everything; what more was there to clutch?

The scriptures tell us that Jesus appeared to them. He ate fish with them and shared bread and wine with him. He showed them his hands and feet. They truly saw him, in many ways, for the first time. And he taught them one last time, and they heard him as they never had before.

Then he took them a short ways outside of Jerusalem, to the east, through the Kidron Valley and over the Mt. of Olives to Bethany. And there he raised his hands in the air and departed from them for the last time.

This time their experience of losing him was entirely different. This time they did not react in fear. They were not filled with grief. Jesus had said to Peter a few days before, "Once you have returned, once you have changed, you strengthen your brothers." And, indeed, Peter had changed greatly in the intervening days. He had returned, in a manner of speaking. He had returned to being his disciple. But the person he returned to being was honestly little like the person he had been before; the disciple he had become was little like the one he had had been.

In First Corinthians Paul says, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?"

Peter that day in Bethany had become ready for solid food. He had, finally, left behind quarreling and jealousy, and most significantly, he had left behind his self-centered hopes for what Jesus could do for him.

A few days before Peter had thought he could not live without Jesus' presence. Peter had thought he could not live without Jesus' power to give him what he wanted. A few days before all Peter could handle was a milk-toast Gospel. But now he was changed. He was ready to take up the charge Jesus had given him just before things came crashing down, the thing he hardly heard at the time and surely did not grasp. Now Peter was ready to take up the solid food of the Gospel, to strengthen his companions, to await the Holy Spirit, and to take up the mantle of a disciple of Christ.

This time when Jesus left them, when he ascended from them in Bethany, there was no fear and gnashing of teeth. The final words of the Gospel of Luke tell us that "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Peter, and the others, too, had changed. Now they found great joy in what, only a few days before, they thought they could not survive. Peter was now ready for solid food. Peter was now ready for solid food, ready to strengthen the others, and ready, for the first time, to lead a life of true discipleship. And his heart was filled with joy. Amen.