

Welcome to the Joyful Feast
Mark 16:1-8 and Revelation 19:1-9
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Almost every time we celebrate communion, I offer an invitation to the table that begins, “This is the joyful feast of the people of God.” In the various liturgies used used by churches, there are a number of other invitations, but I just love the image created by those words, “the joyful feast.” Who doesn’t love a feast? I mean, a party is one thing, but a feast is another matter entirely! The word feast raises the bar, doesn’t it? If you get invited to a feast, and there are not tables overflowing with savory delights, and sweet treats, someone has lied, or at least fallen down on the job. Charles Dickens may have described the feast of all feasts in “A Christmas Carol” when he wrote, “Heaped on the floor were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, redhot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam.” Now *that’s* a feast, at least on the food end of the story.

And of course, the feast is also the people. The English clergyman, Edward Hyde, was right on the money when he said, “It is not the quantity of the meat, but the cheerfulness of the guests, which makes the feast,” and that is certainly true when we look at this communion table before us and see very little in the way of

actual food. Nothing piled up here. Not much variety either. The bread and juice are good, but believe me, you are what make this meager meal a feast, you, and of course, our host, Jesus Christ. And of course, we are not the only guests at this feast. No, the whole of the church triumphant, in every time and place, partakes too of this feast, and that makes all the more joyful, no matter what's on the menu.

Michelangelo said, "I feast on wine and bread, and feasts they are."

The Bible is of course, no stranger to the feast. Consider the feast Abraham asked Sarah to make for the three visitors under the oaks of Mamre, the wedding at Cana where Jesus offers his first sign, the killing of the fatted calf in celebration of the return of the Prodigal Son. Feasting is a symbol of victory, of salvation, of good things to come. And so we are led to one of our Scripture readings for tonight from the book of Isaiah. (Read Isaiah 25:1-9). What a beautiful vision of God's provision, not only rich food and drink in abundance, but compassion and justice. Now, remember that these words come in the midst of long passages of judgment on not only the nations around God's people Israel, but also Israel herself. Things are going to be bad, really bad, on account of their unfaithfulness and their wicked ways, but that feast, that glorious feast is held out there as a promise. But whatever suffering and death they will endure *will* come to an end, and God "will swallow up death for ever... and will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth." It sounds a lot like Easter morning.

There's another vision of a feast I'd like to share. It's the one with which we began our season of Lent as a reminder of where we were headed. It's from the book of Revelation, in the nineteenth chapter. (Read Revelation 19:1-9) "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," the feast of all feasts, one to put Dickens' description to shame. And the guests are all there, dressed in their finest linen, bright and pure, the righteous saints gathered all together. The enemy is defeated once and for all, and everything Isaiah described comes to full fruition. The only tears shed at this feast are tears of joy and laughter, the only disgrace not enjoying yourself enough. Welcome to the joyful feast!

Tonight we celebrate not only a foretaste of that final feast at the end of time, but also Jesus' final feast with his disciples, the one we remembered this Maundy Thursday. It didn't feel much like a joyful feast at the time. There were some confused disciples around that table. There was a dark cloud full of words of death hanging over them, suspicion that one in their ranks would betray all their hopes and dreams. Yes, it was the Passover feast, and they had to wonder whether God would pass over this house and not claim the firstborn Son of God. The menu looked more like the Psalmist's bread of tears than Isaiah's rich marrow. But that was Thursday, and a lot can happen in just a few days. Just ask the women who fled the tomb in terror and amazement.

The resurrection is, of course, God's way of making sure the feast Isaiah prophesied becomes the feast Revelation describes. There is no wedding feast

without the bride and groom, and without the empty tomb, there is neither bride nor groom. Christ's resurrection means that he is alive and well to host that final feast, but it also means that there is a bride to get dressed. We wouldn't be here, the church wouldn't be here, if Jesus had remained sealed up in that tomb. Maybe the disciples would have held themselves together for a little while in honor of their fallen leader, and tried to continue to live as Jesus had taught them, but it is hard to imagine them going on for very long. What hope would there be of God's kingdom coming to pass if even Jesus couldn't make a difference? And what kind of feast could they throw anyway? Certainly not the kind God promises to throw.

But what does the young man, dressed in a white robe, say to the two Mary's and Salome: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you." Not just to Galilee, mind you, but way on ahead, to the highest heaven to go and get everything ready for the wedding feast, to prepare all the garments of fine linen, pure and bright, to gather up the handkerchiefs to wipe away those tears, and to make room in the divine stomach to swallow up death once and for all. Yes, Jesus is going ahead of us to make all of that ready. He is the first-born of the dead, and what that means is that he is the downpayment on our

resurrection, our invitation to the feast. To say there is a first-born implies there are others born again later, and that's our promise this Easter day.

This table, the one here in front of us, is God's reminder of the feast to come. It's a down payment of sorts. We may still weep at the violence and destruction we see around us, for the Kenyans killed at their school, for the people we know with cancer, for the abuse and neglect of children, for the hunger of millions that seems to belie the possibility of a feast. Death may still seem to swallow us up, we may still wallow in our disgrace as fallible human beings, the food and wine may still seem to be locked up in the divine cupboard. But we can look at this table, we can come forward to eat from it, we can share it with others, and we can have hope that the Thursdays and the Fridays of our lives come with the guarantee of Sunday. The resurrection does not solve all our problems. The Sacrament does not satisfy all our hunger. But they give us hope, and they light the fires of our imaginations, and that will light our way. And as the author, Jane Stanton Hitchcock, reminds us, "The key to life is imagination. If you don't have that, no matter what you have, it's meaningless. But if you have imagination, you can make feast of straw."

Friends, we have so much more than straw to begin with, beginning with this table, and with each other, the guests our Lord has invited to this place to feast together tonight. As we come to the table for tonight's joyful feast, let us remember that our host has gone before us to prepare everything for the feast of which tonight is, by comparison, just straw. Amen.