

***“How Leftovers Could Become the Main Course”***

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Easter 7, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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**Readings**

Acts 1:6–14; Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35; 1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11; John 17:1–11

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1:12–14)

Those who followed Jesus, we hear from Luke, came from all walks of life — poor and rich, old and young, disabled and restored, criminal and honorable, beggars and businesspeople, male and female. They were a crew of folk who had all left their respective homes, hoping. Some hoped for a closer contact with the Creator, a connection that Jesus helped them to feel. Some hoped for a renewal of the blessing they had received from Jesus once. Some hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, who would initiate the blessing of overthrowing oppressors who held them down.

Toward the end of his ministry, Luke and John attest, some accompanied Jesus for a different reason — because of their blood-ties.

For example, his family was traveling with him at the end. Mary his mother, and his brothers James, Simeon, Judas, and Joses had all, at an earlier time, actually opposed his ministry, calling for him to return home. If his four brothers were also the children of Mary, then Jesus was the eldest sibling and the rightful head of household, probably the only one whom Joseph had trained to run the business. When Jesus did not return to Nazareth to resume the family business, they may finally have come along with him for the sake of having something to eat. Now, with Jesus gone what could they do?

Disciples' family members were among them, too. James the Less, identified as the son of Alphaeus, was one whose mother was also among Jesus' disciples (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). The wife of Zebedee, the other James' and John's father, is said to have gone with them.

All very different people, who joined Jesus' band for very different reasons, these are the ones who were left. True, they were from the same region and, we know from studies of the history of the Jewish people, they were likely bound together, in addition to their connection through Jesus, by a common dislike of Judean Jews who were in turn suspicious of their northern ways. The north, you see, had been a seat of unrest against Jerusalem ever since Jerusalem had been made the capital under King David. So, all the disciples and their families who traveled with Jesus were connected at least by regionalism, and this would have made for them a small enclave in the Holy City, after that fateful Passover.

But they still were fishers and accountants, and patriots and revolutionaries, and prostitutes and servants, and homebodies and students and teachers and, well, you get the idea. And now, having followed Jesus for whatever length of time they had, they had one last thing to unite them — unemployment, displacement, and for most of them homelessness.

*Whatever would they do? Indeed, now, who were they?* ... now that Jesus was no longer there to lead them, and the sight of him was disappearing into the mist.

It's interesting to me, as I wonder about the questions of what could be next for Jesus' followers, to recognize that it is only Luke who tells this story of Jesus' Ascension, and that the story was so important to the writer that it gets told twice: once at the end of the gospel, and once more at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The author of Luke tells no other story about Jesus more than once.

I don't want to over-emphasize the importance of the story, but telling it twice makes its

telling pretty emphatic. It seems to me that there is a pretty clear message of reassurance that the author intends for us to receive.

The earliest editions of Mark don't even mention that anybody saw Jesus after the resurrection. The tomb was empty, and that was it, except for a young man dressed in linen who explained why Jesus' body was missing!

In Matthew, as the women are leaving the tomb, they (and only the women) see Jesus, who tells them to gather the disciples and high-tail it for home. Then when everyone got back to Galilee, Matthew says, Jesus appeared to them and gave them the Great Commission, to go into the world baptizing regardless of nationality.

So, in Mark, Jesus disappeared. In Matthew, Jesus gave a parting word, but there is no mention of a literal, physical departure; there is evidently just an understood reality.

In John also, there is no Ascension. The disciples stay in Jerusalem a few days past the end of the Passover holiday, and then they go home back to business as usual. The author leaves you with Jesus, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple conversing after breakfast on a Galilean beach, and that's it.

But Luke insists that the disciples stuck around Jerusalem for forty days, and that as he ascended, Jesus told them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come.

In John, the conversation that Jesus and Peter are having on that beach is one about responsibility and loneliness. Jesus wants to know that Peter will assume leadership, now that he will be gone. Peter wants to know why life isn't fair; he asks a question about why the Beloved Disciple will get to live longer than any of the rest of them, and in the question you can sense the pain that was in him. He is already lonely for his teacher, and jealous of his co-worker. It's a remarkably human moment, the kind we all tend to feel when suddenly our world changes, because our comfort has been taken from us.

*Whatever shall we do?* we wonder, as each feels abandoned, maybe even betrayed, by God.

Luke shows a scene of similar perplexity, with all of Jesus' people standing at the top of a hill, gazing into the sky. They had to be wondering the same things as Peter, about fairness, maybe even about whether giving up as much as they had, now was worth it. Among them suddenly are two in white robes who say words to the effect of "Not up there. Out here."

For as painful as it may be to realize that Jesus was gone, it was nevertheless time for those leftovers to become something new by God's grace, however unlikely the possibility seemed.

Here gathered on a Sunday with our own eyes looking toward heaven to see if maybe we can catch a glimpse of one who has gone away, we may think that our only hope is there. And that may be true, but other people's hope is here among us.

So, for a couple of hours on a Sunday morning we can gather here and cast our gaze upward, but we cannot allow that to last. For there are reminders among us that the world calls for a Messiah. And, we have to acknowledge, Jesus the Anointed has in turn anointed us for the same work as he did. Quite frankly, that makes us more than just leftovers.

What is there to do?

In Acts, Luke says, the church prayed. Most importantly, Luke says, they prayed *together*. This is something that we at least can afford to do. It costs you nothing but a little time. They prayed, we can pray.

But prayer can seem like idleness, when there is as much ferment in the world as there is: terror and heartbreak and war and street violence and cruelty and stupidity. Fill in your own examples for illustrative purposes here, but hands folded in prayer need eventually to be opened into action. So said those men in white.

Still, leftovers can feel as though they're really pretty much worthless. There is a vivid example of how effective they can be, though, which we are about to participate in. And I'd

hope you might give it your full attention when it comes.

At the end of the Seder meal Jesus shared with his disciples there came an event which in modern Passover meals is called, the *Afikomen* (literally, the dessert course). One last morsel of bread remains, with one remaining glass of wine. Both are leftovers themselves, though some would say they've been reserved.

Paul in 1 Corinthians and the evangelists in the Gospels invoked the memory of that bread and wine when, they said, at the end of his final meal among them, Jesus instituted communion. Nowadays, we don't think of the bread and wine of communion as leftovers. We refer to them as the meal. I'm thinking that it's significant also that in this meal we technically cut straight to dessert!

What's more, according to John, three days later, on the evening of the day when Jesus was resurrected, as the first day of the week turned into the second, Jesus appeared to ten of his disciples who were hiding in the room in Jerusalem where they had shared the Last Supper, and in which he had prayed for their unity: "Make them one, the way you and I are one," Jesus had prayed.

John says that Jesus breathed in their faces and said, "I give you my spirit. Hereafter, that which you bind is bound in heaven, and that which you loose is loosed in heaven." He gave the disciples his spirit, his power, his authority. Thus, they each became not leftovers, but together they became the main course.

This is not to say that they weren't prone to forget their status. We know that petty rivalries arose. That last conversation on the beach between Peter and Jesus was in part an argument over the fairness of the Beloved Disciple outliving the Rock. And Paul and James the brother of Jesus would have a fateful argument about a decade later, over whether Gentiles were worthy as themselves to be Christians. But some whisper of the Spirit of Christ would remind these people, and they would make peace and thereby find themselves restored.

That same whisper of the Spirit is with us: we may think that we're alone here, and we will behave like abandoned children sometimes, acting out, for what we imagine is a lack of attention from the One who has loved us. But eventually, by God's grace, we'll remember that we really cannot do without one another because of how much potential we enjoy together. Maybe we're leftovers, but moreover and more importantly, we are the main course, that last, sweet taste of bread and wine, and others depend on us to be for them who Jesus has been for us.

We have to make ourselves as fully aware as we can, always, of the Spirit of holiness and of the spiritual presence of Christ who binds us together, and to recognize that we together are more than the sum of our parts. However much we may feel like the remains of a meal, however much we may differ — by profession, by family, by expression of faith, by learning, by disposition, by culture — we are the Church, the main course, and Christ's gift to the world.

God help us.

Amen.