

“Food on the Table”

Luke 24:28–43

Meals play a large part of every Christmas...then and now.

It all started with a meal, that one piece of fruit shared by Eve and Adam. This was not just any fruit, but fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden called Eden. It was the one thing forbidden them in the garden. But they chose to trust a snake rather than God and ate the fruit. And their eyes were opened. And what did they see? Only their own nakedness and shame. This was a meal of sin and death, a meal that doomed God’s good creation and all humanity to lives of suffering and hardship. For the choice made by Adam and Eve is the same choice we make, the same choice made by all those who came before us – with one exception. And it is to him that we turn.



A birth and a resurrection

It may seem odd to be talking resurrection (Easter!) at Christmas but, in truth, it is gloriously wonderful. Without Easter, there would be no Christmas. If Jesus of Nazareth had died a failed would-be Messiah like so many others, we would not even be a “we,” much less observing Advent.

Even as we gaze at the Christmas star or the manger, the cross and the resurrection are always in the background and, sometimes, directly in view (Luke 2:35). It is a bit fascinating how central meals are to the story, from that first meal of fruit in the garden to Jesus eating fish to demonstrate the fact of his resurrection. It seems right that food plays such a big part of our Christmas traditions. So, let us take a closer look at two meals on the day of Jesus’ resurrection.

On the road to Emmaus

Cleopas and his wife had wandered around since Friday afternoon. Jesus, their teacher, their Lord, their beloved, had perished in a terrible maelstrom of suffering. Now, on Sunday afternoon, they undertook the walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Not a long walk as distance goes, but a hard walk through the Judean hills and forests west of the great city.

As they walked, they talked yet again about what had happened. How could it be? What did it mean? Had all their hopes come to nothing but blood and pain? But their contemplation was interrupted when they were joined by a stranger. One who seemed to have no knowledge of what had been going on during Passover; pretty darn clueless it seemed to Cleopas and Mary, but, nonetheless, they filled him in, even telling him the strange story from that morning. It seemed that the tomb of Jesus had been empty when the women arrived there to finish their work and they claimed that angels had said he was alive. Really? As Cleopas and Mary told the stranger their story, their own confusion was evident.

Suddenly, the stranger turned on them, upbraiding them for being so clueless themselves. Didn’t they understand and trust the writings of the prophets? Could they not grasp that the Messiah had not come to rescue Israel from suffering, but through suffering? So, he set about to help them see the truth of Israel’s scriptures in a way they never had before.

When the three of them arrived at the village, the stranger motioned that he was going on alone. But Cleopas and Mary were good people, careful to be hospitable, and had learned something of their Master’s way. They prevailed upon the stranger to stay and dine with them in their home. In fact, they would provide him shelter overnight.

The man stayed. As they began to eat, he took the bread Mary had set on the table, lifted it heavenward, blessed the meal, tore the loaf, and offered it to his hosts. Cleopas and Mary were both quite famished, so they hurriedly took a piece of the bread and bit it into.

As they enjoyed that first bite, *their eyes were opened*. Unlike Adam and Eve whose eyes had been opened to a ruined creation, marked by hurt and loss, Mary and Cleopas could see the rebirth of creation, its utter redemption and renewal. What had been lost had now been found. All this realized in a moment, as their minds absorbed the fact—the indisputable fact—that the stranger was none other than Jesus. They had been blind to him before, but now they could see more clearly than they had ever seen anything in their entire lives. R. A. Culpepper writes:

Cleopas and his companion [probably his wife Mary] discovered at the table that their traveling companion was the Lord himself. They had not planned it as a sacred moment, but in the act of sharing their bread with a stranger they recognized the risen Lord in the fellow traveler. In a fascinating way, the Emmaus story is the counterpart to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In that parable, the rich man feasts daily but never notices the beggar at his gate or shares his bread with him. From Hades he pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers, but Abraham responds, “They have Moses and the prophets,” and when the rich man persists, Abraham’s final word is, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (16:31). Here again is a story that involves Moses and the prophets and resurrection from the dead, and a story that pivots at the table. The difference between them is what happens at the table. Cleopas and his companion share their table with a stranger and discover that they have been in the presence of the Lord. The rich man took no notice of the beggar until he was in torment in Hades. **Fantasize for a moment. What might the rich man have discovered if he had shared his bread with Lazarus?**¹ [Emphasis is mine]

Just a fact

Cleopas and Mary hardly finished their meal before getting up to head to Jerusalem in the chilly night air. How could they sit at home even a few hours when the whole world had changed? They had to be with their friends and fellow disciples. They had hardly walked into the room to join the other disciples, when Jesus, with whom Cleopas and Mary had been eating just a few hours before, also arrived in the room.

Surely this must be Jesus’ ghost, they thought. But Jesus quickly dispelled that notion. Standing in the midst of the disciple’s evening meal, Jesus reached out, took some of the fish and ate it. Right there in front of them, he enjoyed some broiled fish. He was no ghost, he was “flesh and bones.” Since Friday, Jesus had passed through death to a life-after-death and then on to a life after life-after-death² – that of resurrection, reemodiment. Nothing would never, ever be the same.

Nothing. How could it be? Jesus had not been merely resuscitated only to face death again, as had Lazarus. No, Jesus had passed through death to a newly embodied life. He even looked a bit different. Still a body that could eat, but transformed somehow.

What did it mean?

It meant that all Jesus had said and had done was to be understood in light of his resurrection. Indeed, the Day of the Lord had arrived in him and the great resurrection of the dead had begun. These believers and generations more would take a long time working all this out. But the fact of it was not to be denied. Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and buried, had been resurrected by God to new life. What had gone so terribly in that garden long before had now been put right. Where there was hate there would now be love, where there was loss there would now be gain, where there was death there would now be life, eternal life, resurrected life.

¹ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 9, p. 482). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

² Another of the wonderful phrases from N. T. Wright

If we keep our eyes focused on the new life that God gives, a life that will not end, we can live our present life as we were created to live it – loving God and loving neighbor, enjoying and sharing God’s good, renewed, and redeemed creation.

“TO SAY THAT JESUS IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD IS NOT TO SAY THAT HE HAS RETURNED TO HIS EARTHLY LIFE. THAT WAS GONE. IT WAS DEAD. TO SAY THAT JESUS IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD IS TO SAY THAT GOD REACHED INTO THAT TOMB AND INTO HISTORY, LIFTING JESUS UP TO NEW LIFE. AND IT IS TO SAY THAT GOD WILL DO THE SAME THING FOR US.”

Barnes, C. (2004, April 6). “We’re all terminal”. *The Christian Century*, April 6, 2004.

The Christmas and Easter Challenge

We tend to diminish the meaning of Christmas and, in turn, Easter in two ways. First, we sometimes make the mistake of seeing the virgin birth and the resurrection as no more than demonstrations of God’s power, perhaps the greatest “miracles” ever but little more than that. Second, we might think

of the resurrection as Jesus proving something about what will happen to us after we die, showing us the “way to heaven” as it were. The problem is that both of these meanings short-change us all. For the New Testament writers, Jesus’ birth meant that God had stepped into space and time, into human history, to finally put right what went so terribly wrong in the Garden of Eden. Jesus’ resurrection meant that the kingdom of God had arrived and that it was time for the people of God to get to work being the light to the world and the salt of the earth, feeding the poor and clothing the naked, making disciples of all nations.

Hence, when Paul concludes his glorious chapter on the resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians, he doesn’t say, “Jesus has been raised and God’s victory won, so have faith and you’ll get to heaven.” Instead, Paul writes, “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Christmas and Easter are very public proclamations that God has acted decisively in human history to rescue us and to renew all of creation. God has called us to build for his kingdom as we confidently await its final consummation. And, thankfully, God is with us in this. God’s Spirit enables us to do the work that God has given, refreshing us in our prayers, our worship, our learning, our loving, and our serving. God’s new creation has begun and we are summoned to be part of it. Alleluia! Christ has come! Christ is risen!

Daily Bible Readings

More biblical meals

Monday	Genesis 3	A meal of rebellion
Tuesday	Exodus 12	A meal of salvation
Wednesday	Numbers 11	A meal of ingratitude
Thursday	2 Samuel 13:23-37	A meal of revenge
Friday	Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-10	A meal of abundance
Saturday	Mark 14:12-25	A meal of covenant