

Easter 3B

Luke 24.36B-48

Sunday, April 18, 2021

You learn quickly in Minnesota that fish are not alike. The king of fish is the Walleye. It's white tender meat is sweet, and comes with no bones after cleaning. The meat is perfect for a beer batter preparation or pan seared. Meanwhile, the Northern Pike may look similar after you clean it, but beware. Its white meat tastes fine. You just need to watch out for one thing: bones. Translucent toothpicks linger in the pike, even when it's been cleaned. Chomp down too quickly and swallow, and you may have a chunk of cartilage lodged in your throat. No, fish are not alike.

When it comes to first century Palestine, I would imagine that fish were not alike there and then as well. While I assume something caught fresh off the boat would be mighty tasty, I also trust that Jesus never tasted anything quite like a Walleye. (Too bad. He would have loved it.) Today's gospel account from Luke does not specify what the type of fish was that Jesus ate. Perhaps it was red mullet, maybe hake, possibly sea bream or a type of tilapia. One hopes it wasn't carp! All we know is that it was broiled and Jesus took it and ate it in the disciples' presence. According to the account, Jesus' friends were so weirded out by this encounter with the risen Jesus that he says to them, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." To prove he is no ghost, Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish. Hopefully, it wasn't like a Northern Pike with a hidden bone ready to lodge in his throat. Come to think of it, however, had he coughed on a fish bone it would have been even more proof to his fleshly--and non-ghostly--presence in their midst.

This post-resurrection encounter with Jesus in Luke's gospel is such a strange one. It is almost comedic. The disciples are startled and terrified, thinking that a ghost is before them, and Jesus is hungry and wants a little fish. How do the disciples *not* know him? *What* in particular were they looking for? Clearly, they had no idea what his crucifixion and resurrection was all about. Which, perhaps, is not too far removed from many of our experiences with Jesus. How is it that we do not know Jesus in our own day? And *what*, in particular, are we looking for?

Answering the second question helps us to understand the first. When we realize what we are looking for, we might be able to work back to where we look for Jesus,

and how, at times, we fail to recognize him in our midst. No shame in acknowledging this. Indeed, we are in good company with the very first believers. So, what are we looking for?

Akin to the disciples, perhaps we expect an ethereal or ghost like presence to engage us. Or, possibly another way of expressing this is that we look for a spiritualized Jesus not a fleshly one. We seek a Christ who transcends the world and invites us to do the same. We expect religion to free us from the bonds of our mortality and to connect us to the eternal. We desire a force that relegates all the other powers that impinge upon us to nothingness. We are freed and released from the banal and the bothersome. We want to shed our mortality and this mortal coil. Yet, as Frederick Buechner wonderfully noted, “One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.”

Which is what we do from time to time, is it not? We try to be something that we are not? Trying to transcend our physical world by focusing on some spiritual aspect? We don't want to have clay feet. We want to reach the heavens. We don't want to be limited by time. We want to enter the eternal. We don't want to be burdened by the troubles of this world. We imagine an other-worldly paradise that is our ultimate escape, even as we use it to evade reality here and now. Put simply and metaphorically, we don't want any fish bones lodged in the throat of our existence. Right? And the world is filled with fish bones designed to frustrate or torment or discourage. It is no coincidence that the Spanish term for flesh--*carne*--is the root for so much of what we experience in the world as carnage. The ongoing and disproportionate shootings of people of color by police in Chicago, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Hartford, Miami, New York, Corvallis, Phoenix, Washington D.C., and elsewhere in just the past two weeks makes us painfully aware of our limits and our shortcomings. The pervasiveness of guns and gun violence in our culture--100 people dying each day in the U.S. because of guns, and 230 more who are shot and injured each day--remind us of the heinousness that our humanness is capable of. The most recent shooting in Indianapolis a painful reminder of the lethal mixture of firepower and mental illness. Who would not want to steal away?

Yet, as David Lose notes, “across the Scriptures and particularly in the New Testament, the story told is not one of humanity's journey of improvement and spiritual enlightenment but rather that it's actually the eternal and holy God that embarks on a trek... to be like us and encounter us where we are.” Which is all the

more interesting when you consider these post-resurrection accounts. They are not experiences of the risen Jesus in some cosmic form. The encounters are with the one that the disciples knew prior to the crucifixion. A human. Jesus. Thus, the manger in Bethlehem and the healer of many and the crucified one, as well as Jesus eating broiled fish are all one and the same. The message is also the same. God comes as one of us to experience all that we experience. God enters into the joys and sufferings of life to journey with us in the fullness that is our life. God embraces all that we are so that we might realize that God understands all that we are. God loves us as we are--not some idealized or perfected reality of who we think we are or want to be--but us, as we are. And God redeems us as we are. So also in the story of the resurrection. God comes for real people, redeems real people, and promises to resurrect real people.

This promise reengages us with reality, rather than taking us out of reality. God's presence in life allows us to enter into the problems of life, with the knowledge that we are not alone in that struggle. And, finally, the physical, resurrected Jesus continues to meet us in our fleshly and mortal reality. Reminding us that there is no place that God is not, and no world more treasured than this one, nor anyone more valued than you in, of all things, your very flesh and bones.