

This is real Jesus. That's what Luke wants us to get. As if we're in that Escape Room—tense, stuck, anxiety—with the disciples. Betrayed, crucified, buried, Jesus' way of joy and hope at a shocking dead end. Truth of love's power he lived dissolved. Given all they expected, so hard to accept. Even more mind-blowing and heart-spinning surreal, now a tale of an empty tomb. Worse than my dog Bennet shriek-barking when a ball gets lost under furniture! It's Picasso painting disorienting. It's mass shooting, Capitol insurrection disturbing. It's cancer, addiction, natural disaster distressing. They were telling stories, trying to make sense when bolting back and bursting into their world turned upside down, two friends share how they met the risen Christ—the intimacy of breaking bread. Then they / we see it, see him, feel the presence, know the promise too—he's here! As if this Sanctuary is that room long ago. "Peace be with you," Jesus says, because naturally humans so often respond with fear when something doesn't fit our box. And the gospel miracle is: the risen Christ moves them / moves us from immense sadness and emotional paralysis to courageous witness.

Know Jesus' real presence. Become the real presence of Jesus' love and life. Friends, how do we get real? Luke includes two details to give us a clue. "Look at my hands and feet ... see, touch, believe," Jesus invites. Maybe we imagine nail-wounds, as we read last week in John's gospel. Except Luke never gives that gory detail. So maybe it's simply, genuinely just ordinary parts of Jesus not covered by a robe. Either way, friends, seems to me it's about intimacy, authenticity, material

human connection; no superficial, fleeting, ghostly apparition. Divine Love embodied in ways tangible, visible, vulnerable.

And then a little morsel about broiled fish. Sharing a meal – something they'd caught, cooked, consumed, and he savored too. Often in scripture, from Ancient Hebrews through common Roman homes, sharing meals binds a covenant relationship, as if to say this grace, this promise, this commitment is now part of me. Us. Together. In God's presence. Jesus with so many others deemed least, lost, outcast—eating, honored, accepted, respected. Love made real in the visceral reciprocity of receiving and giving in return.

Then, the school bell rings again. Luke says Jesus opened them to inspiring stories baked over centuries and passed on to nurture like morsels of broiled fish. Imagine a buffet of favorite stories we remember like holiday dinners, good news to feed hungry hearts. Maybe Jesus sang psalms and told again parables of the prodigal, Good Samaritan, Great Banquet, lost coin, urging them to trust God's reign of grace is among them, within them now, unto eternal life. And it felt again like they'd just shared that feast of 5000 beside the sea—out of five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets left over. And it all came clear, alive, enduring, real because they opened their hearts to receive it, to believe, to trust that Way, Truth, Life for them.

This is real Jesus, Luke urges us to witness. So friends, how do we get real, living faith in Holy Love? Intimacy, vulnerability, authenticity revealing parts of who we most truly are out from under garments of whatever we put on, facades we weave to please, to protect, to hide, to be hip. Uncovering scars, lifting shrouds of fear and death, like enfleshed mercy offering someone else a chance to connect, savor grace, celebrate hope, and nurture resurrection. Intimacy, authenticity embodied through visceral reciprocity.

It's striking to hear this sacred text after a year of so much visual, virtual lacking the visceral. How often we've shared recently: it's so good to simply be together again for committees, Bible studies, or simple pop-in conversations. To see another's face, hear voices, sense mysterious vivacity pulsing in shared space. Yes, we're grateful for Zoom, Skype, Teams, and however we've connected in some semblance when otherwise there'd be absence. They've been important and helpful alternatives. We've accomplished work. We've shared insights. We've felt not quite so alone. We give thanks that people may be watching our worship, now or later, in homes all around town and down to North Carolina, Georgia, Texas. Surely, some life changes we've grown into over the past year will continue with some benefit into the future. And I celebrate positives provided (though I've never yet been able to lead worship in my pajamas)! Still, after returning to teaching in the classroom, while we shared tea face to face after months of FaceTime, when you walk into this architectural creation of windows and walls, light and sound and scent and sanctuary ... you've said it: virtual is simply not the same.

I wonder how that might inspire ways we'll relate in normal life. How we might see and be real Jesus—deeper than surface, superficial, to get to what's most truly real in divinely human relationship. Seeking moments we might say authentically, reciprocally, sensing viscerally: I see the Sacred, I know the Holy Love in you.

Here's a glimpse. A recent lunch as, funnily enough, we both savored grilled salmon wraps. Talking as friends, spiritual companions. "Is it a good day?" I asked. Across the table, a humble, philosophical smile, "Well, when you should have died seven years ago, every day is a good day." After the patio emptied, my friend pulled up sleeves a bit more (so to speak) showing healing hands and how they're offered to others. AA meetings every day, at various groups around town. Day by day, making it years, so far. And when some meetings get a little too comfortable or easy, my companion said, I try to seek another where you know life will likely be a bit more

raw. Where other companions will be working on hours sober, and just maybe I can offer a little support to those most needing a helping hand and heart. Just meeting people wherever they are with grace, with no judgment, flowing from our Higher Power, who we know and name as God in Christ. And when I asked about sharing today what I saw as a holy witness, lingering on swirls of the Spirit writing this sermon, my companion responded humbly: “Funny how God works. Who knows maybe someone will take a step closer to a meeting.” This is real Jesus.

And just as I wrote that bit, my daughter Ailih was cooking our fish dinner, listening to Supertramp:

Give a little bit
Give a little bit of your love to me
I'll give a little bit of my life for you
Now's the time that we need to share
So find yourself, we're on our way back home

Maybe Supertramp isn't quite holy scripture. Still, it seems pretty close to what the apostle John tried to inspire in his letter earliest Christians trying to bear witness in their world. {read 1 John 3:11, 14-18}

Give a little bit of our love, John urges. Love ... more than adoring thoughts or sentimental emotion. Love expressed in particulars of present reality as Stephen Cooper writes, serving, seeking transformation into ever more abundant life.ⁱ To behold how the Way and Truth of Sacred Grace makes all things new. Grace that is more than an idea, a philosophy, some internal insight, individual accomplishment as Thom Long writes in our other bulletin quote. This Sacred Grace must be tangible, touchable, to go deeper in the mysteries of love and humanity.ⁱⁱ

Friends, after this year of virtuality, businesses, schools, churches talk about changes that may continue. Committee meetings by Zoom. Our national church General Assembly considering a move to virtual gathering to save money, and maybe include some who can't travel. Even discussion of how we understand worship and sacraments. Of course, not all pastors and church leaders agree. Again, I'm grateful for whatever connections individuals feel and share in some way virtually. Still, I incline toward ministry colleagues, among teachers, doctors, many others who maintain it's just not the same. Not the level of intimacy, authenticity, visceral reciprocity that embodies full humanity. And as much as we laud goodness, there's a place to lament what's still lost and hold out with longing commitment for when it is whole, truly real, and thereby more meaningful.

However we experience this worship, dear friends, I believe God in Christ wants us to seek ways to share visceral reciprocity of loving relations wherever we are. To live faith in our own way and truth and life, with the promise and the redemptive power of witnessing: This is real Jesus.

Like many grains of wheat becoming one loaf, we're about to meet Jesus in sharing plate and cup as we become the body of the Risen Christ. Let's close with another remembrance that might inspire how we can know and share real Jesus with intimacy, authenticity, and visceral reciprocity. A remembrance of growing up with two grandmothers living in the same town. Holidays at both houses: feast upon feast, gift upon gift, yet utterly different. My mother's family is Puerto Rican, writes Nina Simone. Holidays were loud—head-throbbing music, people laughing hard, door open to anyone. There was a stack of basket plate holders to grab as you reached the potluck buffet. When done, you tossed your plate so someone else could slide theirs into the holder. Meals were unpredictable, fluid, and abundant. My father's family owned a hotel—hospitality their livelihood. Clockwork holiday meals were never rushed—table set with beautiful china, and each person with a

designated seat at the table. Plates and chairs counted, name cards laid out beforehand. There was a place for everyone. We were expected.

Simone's two grandmothers delighted in each other, wildly different, yet great friends. My Puerto Rican grandmother, she recalls gratefully, taught me about welcome: the wide open door, food that never runs out, and the joy of adding one more, the laugh of someone who believed there would always be enough. My china plate grandmother taught me about belonging: what it meant to be known, to be planned for and expected. ... A seat for me at her table ... a space only I could hold. Whenever I'd stop by and visit, it was as if I were the most important person in the world. These two themes—welcome and belonging—are in constant play in our culture and in the church, Simone concludes. When is it time to pile up the paper plates and throw open the door, and when do we count out place settings and call each other by name? ⁱⁱⁱ

Welcoming intimacy, authenticity. The belonging of visceral reciprocity. This is real Jesus, risen among us. This is real Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ See Stephen Cooper, "Theological Perspective", in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 428.

ⁱⁱ See Thomas G. Long, in *Connection: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 232.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nina R. Simone, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/readers-write/plate-essays-readers>