

**Nourishing Body & Soul**Text: John 21:1-19<sup>1</sup>

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Throughout the season of Easter, our scripture readings have been telling us stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances. These appearances are always a surprise: Those who meet the resurrected Jesus are not expecting him. We saw Jesus on the road to Emmaus, where he appeared to Cleopas and an unnamed disciple. We saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, where he appeared to the apostle Paul. We saw Jesus in the upper room, where he appeared to his disciples, except for Thomas. And soon after, we saw him in the upper room again, this time with Thomas and all the gathered disciples. With the exception of the apostle Paul, these resurrection appearances happened to those who knew Jesus personally. Jesus showed up to comfort those who were mourning him and to encourage them to keep on going. He didn't stick around with his disciples for long, but he stayed long enough to be recognized and to share a moment of fellowship with them.

Today's reading fits the same pattern. In this story, we see several of the disciples where we first met them, on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Unsure what to do in the wake of their teacher's death, these disciples had returned home and went back to their old lives as fishermen, possibly to restore a sense of normalcy to their lives in the wake of tragedy. However, the disciples were not being very successful in their old profession. Perhaps after three years on the road with Jesus, they had forgotten how to fish. Or maybe they had simply cast their nets on the wrong side of the boat. Jesus called out to them from the shore and told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. The disciples recognized Jesus and did as they were told, and they then caught so many fish that they had trouble bringing the nets back into the boat.

When the disciples returned to shore with their catch, they accepted Jesus' invitation to eat with him, and they shared a breakfast of fish and bread. This is a familiar scene. You may recall the feeding of the 5,000, when Jesus and his disciples also enjoyed a meal of fish and bread in the very same spot, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. This scene also evokes a more intimate meal, Jesus' last supper with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion.

Many stories of Jesus involve sharing meals. Jesus shared meals not just with his disciples but also the tax collectors and Pharisees. Eating—it's a basic human need! We all have to do it. And eating with others seems to help cement human bonds and foster a sense of shared humanity among those who are sharing in a meal.

Last weekend I attended the second-ever conference for an online community that I belong to called Progressive Asian American Christians (PAAC). I'm somewhat of a "foodie," so I was very excited that this conference was taking place in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, a paradise for those who love Asian food. The conference brought together Asian American Christians from all over the United States, many of whom had previously only communicated online. I noticed that much of the connecting and relationship-building happened around meals: breakfast and lunch at the conference venue, mid-afternoon boba runs, and a

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is preached May 12, 2019 at the 11am English Language Ministry service at Oakland Chinese Community United Methodist Church (edited for clarity and length).

dinner just for the LGBTQ caucus group. We all have to eat, and when we stop to do it together, community forms.

Eating with others is not only about community, it's also about hospitality, care, and compassion. Think about it: how do you feel in body and spirit when you're hungry? I don't know about you, but when I'm hungry, I get irritable, or "hangry." Then, how do you feel after you've eaten? After I eat, I feel more calm. I can then be more present and pleasant with others. Being fed is a gift to the body and soul.

We express love by feeding others and nourishing their bodies and spirits. Mothers nurse and feed their babies to express love and care before their babies can understand a word. The act of feeding can express love even later in life when the words fall short. There is a meme floating around the online forums of PAAC that says, "How Asian parents say 'I'm sorry.': Come eat!" The act of feeding another can be a potent expression of love where cultural, generational, or language barriers inhibit verbal communication.

Throughout scripture, and in the reading this morning, we see Jesus feed his disciples. Jesus connects feeding with love. After Jesus and the disciples finish breakfast, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus responds with a command: "Feed my lambs." A second time, he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Again Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Tend my sheep." One more time, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" One more time Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

Why does Jesus repeat this exchange three times? Three is the number of times that Peter denied Jesus before Jesus was put on the cross, so I wonder if Jesus is giving Peter a chance to make amends for that denial. But I think Jesus is also reinforcing another lesson: that it takes a lot more than words to show the true measure of one's love. Jesus connects Peter's response to the question, "yes, I love you," with an imperative: "Feed my sheep." Therefore, Jesus is saying, if you love me, you must show me not only through your words, but also through your actions. Jesus is asking Peter to continue the ministry of feeding that Jesus began with his disciples several years before at that same location, the Sea of Galilee.

Some of you went on pilgrimage with me to the Holy Land two years ago. I invite you to recall our visit to the Sea of Galilee, a freshwater body of water that still supplies fish to feed people in the region. Does anyone remember the nickname of the fish we ate? It was called "St Peter's fish." This food supply, the same fish that Peter and the disciples were fishing that day, that still feeds people today, is named for St. Peter.

We ate this tasty fish at lunchtime. But can you imagine eating it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? I think Americans would get tired of eating fish all the time. Yet the ancient people of the Galilee region were lucky to have such an abundant, reliable, and healthy food source in the Sea of Galilee. A good meal doesn't have to be anything special, it should just be nourishing.

Yet I think we overlook this today in the United States. Feeding and eating are not the same thing. Not all food is nourishing. Some food is unhealthy for the human body. Cake tastes good, but it can't be the staple of our diet. A diet of cake may satisfy our stomach, but it won't nourish our body and soul. It's won't give us the energy and the nutrients we need to feel good and get through the day. In fact, if we eat too much cake, the sugar and saturated fats may make us feel ill. We can eat and not be nourished if we are not eating healthy, nutrient-rich foods.

The same is true for our spiritual diet in the church. I think we often assume that when we are doing ministry, we are feeding people, body and soul. Yet we must ask ourselves, what are we serving up? What is on the menu at church?

Unfortunately, too many churches in the world are serving toxic soup. They're serving up exclusive theologies that condemn people to hell for asking the wrong question, believing the wrong thing, or loving the wrong way. They cause harm, serving up spiritual, emotional, or even physical abuse. When leaders have been called to account for the harm they have caused, too often their victims have been shamed and silenced for daring to speak up against those in power. This scenario, in which the church sides with the powerful against the vulnerable, is the exact opposite of what Jesus calls us to do.

In the last half-century, Christianity has been defined publicly by some of its loudest and most reactionary leaders, those who have been serving up toxic soup. But this soup has not been nourishing new generations of Christians. It no longer seems like spiritual food to many.

Progressive Asian American Christians is a community largely for those who have grown up with this kind of faith but are no longer sustained by it. Some have been ostracized and shamed for asking honest questions about faith and doctrine. Others are no longer welcome in their faith communities after challenging those in positions of authority. Others have been kicked out of their home churches for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, or for supporting family and friends who belong to the LGBTQ+ community.

Where other churches have failed, PAAC is feeding Christ's sheep. PAAC is feeding people who are hungry for faith, truth, justice, and healing. It is giving people room to be honest and vulnerable about their faith journeys. It has created space for people to think Christian faith anew without being derided, condemned, or dismissed. For some, that has meant ultimately leaving their Christian faith behind, but for others, it has meant finding new life in the gospel. At closing worship, communion was served. Some people in the room had not had communion in years and were in tears.

During the PAAC conference, we learned that the church universal had lost one of its best, most promising young voices: Rachel Held Evans, a 37-year-old author, blogger, wife, and mother of two young children who died after a sudden illness. Rachel spoke to the spiritual journey of many millennials, including in the PAAC community. Her death is a profound loss to those who knew her personally and those who knew her only through her writings. Yet she had an incredible impact in her short life, and we're privileged to have her words with us for eternity.

In her book *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel put words to the thoughts and feelings of many millennials:

“We don't want to choose between science and religion or between our intellectual integrity and our faith. Instead, we long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable. We want to talk about the tough stuff—biblical interpretation, religious pluralism, sexuality, racial reconciliation, and social justice—but without predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers. We want to bring our whole selves through the church doors, without leaving our hearts and minds behind, without wearing a mask.”<sup>2</sup>

As Rachel became a best-selling author, church leaders would ask her how the church could better reach members of her generation. In a 2015 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Rachel wrote an essay under the headline: “Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make church ‘cool.’” Rachel challenged the notion that millennials could be won over with “cooler bands, hipper worship, edgier programming,” or “impressive technology.” She wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015) xiv.

“When I left church at age 29, full of doubt and disillusionment, I wasn’t looking for a better-produced Christianity. I was looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity: I didn’t like how gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people were being treated by my evangelical faith community. I had questions about science and faith, biblical interpretation and theology. I felt lonely in my doubts. And, contrary to popular belief, the fog machines and light shows at those slick evangelical conferences didn’t make things better for me. They made the whole endeavor feel shallow, forced and fake.”<sup>3</sup>

While cool worship bands, edgy programming, impressive technology may help augment a church’s message, they’re not the message itself. These condiments may complement the meal, but they’re not the meal in themselves. In speaking the truth about what she saw as the church’s failings and its essential truths, Rachel Held Evans fed her sheep. She nourished the bodies and souls of people hungry for deep, authentic faith in a world obsessed with style, appearance, and easy answers.

Coming back to the question she was always asked, Rachel Held Evans had good news for the church: that young people are hungry for the gospel, which at its core is radically inclusive. Young people are hungry to see the church extend the sacraments “not simply to the religious and the privileged, but to the poor, the marginalized, the lonely and the left out... Church attendance may be dipping, but God can survive the Internet age. After all, he knows a thing or two about resurrection.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus’ resurrection is a mystery. What it means precisely for our faith, our congregation, and our denomination during this era of church decline cannot be known. We do know, however, that we have been charged with feeding Christ’s sheep. Those who are in our care trust that we will nourish their bodies and souls, not make them ill. Let us love our community through feeding our community so that all may know God’s love. In Christ’s name, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Want Millennials Back in the Pews? Stop trying to make church ‘cool.’” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.2481462f6bb9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html?utm_term=.2481462f6bb9)

<sup>4</sup> Evans, “Want Millennials Back in the Pews?”