

“A FEAST FOR THE SENSES”

Luke 24:36b-48

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

This Jesus who was unjustly prosecuted, mocked, beaten, crucified, who was dead, buried, sealed in a rock-hewn tomb... this Jesus who was raised—stands again in our midst today to ask a very crucial, existential, deeply theological question. His is a question with complex layers of meaning. A question of untold import for our faith. A question that remains perplexing for biblical scholars and everyday readers alike. A question that, when answered, gives us clues to the mysteries of our existence in this vast, infinite, ever-expanding universe. Yes, today, this risen Jesus stands in our midst to ask the question: “Y’all got anything to eat around here?”

Now, if I were Jesus, just raised from the dead in the wake of history’s highest crimes and misdemeanors against God, I would have gotten my Triumphal Entry planning committee back together, added some new lighting, some fog, maybe a few lasers, trade in the donkey for a chariot and some horses, and shown up at Pilate’s headquarters having tipped the local news in advance. Jesus? Jesus comes back home and goes rummaging through the fridge.

I believe Christians—Baptists in particular—have been conditioned to think bodies are left behind in death, that senses are suspect because they are sensual. If we are not deadened in our senses by bad theology, we are deadened as we age. We lose our hearing, our vision, our ability to taste, and on it goes. We appreciate all the more the senses we haven’t yet lost. But before Jesus—resurrected body and all—goes before us into heaven, he stands before us in bodily form, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Jesus invites us into the joy of his bodily resurrection by beginning to resurrect our senses one by one.

Remember, along the road to Emmaus, two disciples’ hearts begin stirring as Jesus speaks to them about the Scriptures? At that point, Jesus’ identity remains a mystery to them. But these disciples whose hearts had just been broken wide open, who were questioning their faith, who were struggling to feel anything other than throbbing grief, overwhelming doubt, and—I also imagine—intense anger, begin feeling a different kind of burning wonder, amazement, excitement. Something deep down inside has begun to recognize the truth about God’s decisive action in Jesus Christ before they can articulate it.

Let’s walk through the Scripture now, and see how Jesus begins awakening our senses. In the verses just before our text selection, the Emmaus road travelers are eating with this stranger. When he takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it, they recognize he is Jesus. But just as soon as they see him, he vanishes. But they do see him. In the blessed breaking of the bread, their sight, which had been scarred by his scars, darkened by the darkness of that day, and blurred by their own tears, comes back to them with brilliant clarity. They once were blind, but now they see! (Jn. 9:25).

They get up to go find the eleven disciples, telling them all they've seen. "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" But as they tell their breathtaking story, Jesus himself stands among them and speaks, "Peace be with you." They hear his voice. They hear his voice in the explanations of the Scriptures, in the breaking of the bread, and now in the invocation of peace. The weight of God's absence on Holy Saturday, as Jesus lay dead in the tomb, has placed untold pressure on their eardrums. It is not unlike the pressure we feel when we change altitudes going up down mountains, or rising and descending on flights, or diving into deeper waters—we do whatever we can to make our ears pop. Jesus stands in their midst. "Peace be with you." They hear again. Their sense of sound is given back to them, that their faith may come "through hearing" (Rom. 10:17).

In the same moment, Jesus restores their sense of smell. Because when Jesus speaks to them, Luke says, "They were startled and terrified." Cue the disciples spitting out their coffee, falling backwards in their chairs. It's not hard to imagine Andrew letting out a few choice words in reaction to the suddenness, or James hiding behind John just in case, or Matthew clutching his chest. How does this restore their sense of smell? It is scientifically known that fear and other responses to stress increases our sensitivity to smell. According to a 2014 study by Dr. Mary Lucero at the University of Utah,

Complex mechanisms including perireceptor events, modulation of sniff rates, and changes in the properties of sensory neurons match the sensitivity of olfactory sensory neurons to the external odorant environment, internal nutritional status, reproductive status, and levels of arousal or stress.¹

Couldn't be simpler! Stress has the effect of increasing our sense of smell. But there is also the truth that they must have recognized Jesus' pleasant scent, the way we adore the smell of a baby's head, or breathe in the presence of a loved one. The lover in the Song of Solomon says, "My beloved is to me a vial of myrrh" (Sol. 1:13). Ephesians 5:2 tells us, "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Maybe it was also the smell of the broiled fish in the room, which they surely associated with their fellowship. Jesus awakens their sense of smell with his bodily presence, and they are made able to breathe in deeply the first fruits of the new creation.

And does Jesus not also invite them to touch him? "Why are you frightened?" he asks. "And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look it's me. My hands. My feet. Touch me and see. I am not a ghost. I have flesh and bones. I have hair, and fingernails, and tear ducts, and freckles." Touch me and see. Touch. Touch! Is there not resurrecting power in touch? Consider someone who is never touched, or who has been touched inappropriately, or harmfully, how much harm it does, and how they retreat and recoil. But Jesus' invites us to touch and see, to feel his warmth and tenderness, so that we may know how powerful and life-giving it is to touch and be touched with gentleness and tenderness.

¹ Mary T. Lucero, "Peripheral Modulation of Smell: Fact or Fiction?" *Seminars in Cell & Developmental Biology*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, January 2013, pp. 58-70. (Published online 2012 Sep 15 at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3546122/>).

Just as it happened with the disciples, death deadens us. Grief numbs us. Years ago, one of my closest friends went through a devastating loss in his family. Sorrow crashed into them like a calculating meteor. The darkness of grief enveloped their household. Loss sent them to the deepest and darkest depths, like being swept away in a flood. Alan said it seemed like months before any of them even laughed again. But one night as they gathered around a movie after dinner, it happened. Joy peeked back in on them and surprised them. How? “It happened,” Alan said, “when we were watching Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory. We finally started laughing again.”

And all of a sudden, some burden of their grief began to dispel. Their senses were awakened again. They were able to find one another again, as the light of laughter began to peek through the cracks around the door.

Jesus asks, “Do you have anything here to eat?” Which is also to ask – “Do you have anything here I can use to show you that I’m not a figment of your imagination? Do you have anything here that I can use to show you that I’m not an illusion, that I’m not a projection?”

Maybe doubts arise in my heart, maybe doubts arise in some of your hearts, because we have not fully allowed Jesus to engage all of our senses. But here’s how resurrection encounters come. When we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our soul, all our strength, all our sight, and hearing, and smelling, and tasting, and touching. In so doing, we present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship.

Jesus is Risen. It’s true! He reveals himself in our midst. May we have the good sense to recognize these resurrection encounters when he comes.

