**Sermon for APRIL 14, 2024 Luke 24:36b-48 “Flesh, Fish, and Fulfillment”**

*Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.*

Several years back there was a television series not for the faint of heart, a sci-fi drama called V. The V stood for Visitor, and it was all about the stealthy invasion of Earth by creatures from another world, whose amazingly attractive leader Anna proclaimed that they came in peace, always. We come in peace, always, she would say. But the humans were leery, scared, confused…because we know that just because somebody *says* they come in peace doesn’t make it necessarily so.

It is a reaction we can imagine among native peoples here in what we now call the United States of America. Folks from Europe arrived, and we may as well have been from another planet, for all the cultural, linguistic, and religious differences between us. And we were peaceful at first, and they were leery and confused and not too trusting at first, and we all know the historic tragedy that came of that visitation.

And so, I take you back to a Sunday night long ago, when one familiar to us also came in peace. It had been a long day after a long weekend; Jesus had been arrested on Thursday, beaten and mocked during the night, brutally crucified on Friday, and earlier this Sunday morning, they had gotten the startling report from the women that Jesus was not in the tomb, but had risen from the dead. Leery and confused and not too trusting at first, there it is. Some folks walking to Emmaus had a brilliant conversation with a deeply spiritual traveler who turned out to actually *be* Jesus; they finally recognized him over supper. And they were so excited, they walked the ten miles back to Jerusalem to tell the whole group, and that is where we join the story in progress; it is late Sunday evening, and they have just returned, and are telling everybody all about their experience of the risen Christ, when suddenly he is right there, in that locked room, and he says, Peace be with you. And just like the folks in that program, V, and just like the Native Americans a century and a half ago, they aren’t too sure about this. Startled, terrified, thought they were seeing a ghost, all of that. But now, for the first time, this apparition will offer compelling proof that he is who he says he is, this prince who comes in peace.

What proof, you ask? Well, he shows them his hands and his feet, mangled and bruised and nail-pierced, as distinctive as a fingerprint now, who else could it be? We were there, albeit at a distance, seriously, who else could it possibly be? He offers that they should take hold of him and feel his solidity; this is no ghost, but they keep their distance. The first proof, then, is flesh. His actual, factual, healed flesh. And then, Jesus does something so brilliant, so understated, but it is this second proof that seals the deal. He asks them if they have anything to eat. You gonna eat that broiled fish, Simon? You gonna eat that? And right there, he not only sets aside his alleged ghostliness, but proclaims his humanity and sets the church on a course from which it will not *ever* recover. For what is more human than eating together? What is more basic, more essential, more definitive of group dynamics, than the fleshy, fishy fellowship of the table?

They say we United Methodists observe three sacraments: Baptism, Holy Communion, and potluck. And I have often said, in my low-church way, that quite possibly the third one has done us the most spiritual good. Not that we don’t need to connect with the Divine as often as we can, surely; but in a world that encourages us to beastliness as a matter of course, a world that takes every opportunity to exploit self-centeredness, reaffirming the best qualities of our humanity is important too. In today’s story, just like at Emmaus, Jesus is made known in the breaking of the bread...actually, the breaking of the fish! In the rest of our church life we may show forth our religiosity, our spirituality, our theological profundity, but it is in the sharing at the table that we reveal our essential humanity. As the hungry world around us looks longingly at our full plates, we can see Jesus within them, and offer to share what we have. They are still asking, got anything to eat here?

Years ago I explored this text with a made-up word. Hard to believe, I know. The word was *epicentric*. Californians know the word epicenter like nobody else in the States, and by this word I meant the kind of conduct that would flow from a known epicenter. Individuals, families, churches, governments, all could be intentionally *epicentric*, letting everything flow forth from the core. In this story, Jesus commands the knowledge of his teaching and salvation to flow forth from Jerusalem. Seems kind of remote to me. And not just to me, evidently; over the centuries, our scholars and theologians have refigured the Christian epicenter various places: in the heart of God, in the cross, in the Sacraments, in the Book of Discipline. But what I am proposing is much more homespun…I think our faith comes to fulfillment every time we share with one another around the table. Wherever and whenever we break bread with compassion and grace and desire for the improvement and nourishment of others, Jesus is there.

The famous ‘breakfast-on-the-beach’ scene at the end of the gospel of John really seals this concept for me; after a similar sequence of identity-proving that involves bread and fish and sharing together, Jesus gives his final instructions. Please notice that they aren’t about preaching the gospel to the ends of the earth, making sure everybody gets properly saved, or any of that. Remember the three redundant questions posed to Peter? Peter, do you love me? You know I do. Well, then, feed my sheep. Feed my people. For in the feeding of one another, your humanity will be revealed, just like mine was. That is where people will see me, that is where the people will meet me, that is where the folks will get to know me, not in your long-winded preachments, not in your dusty tomes of theology, but when they ask, do you have anything here to eat, and you share with them, they will understand volumes about me then. My presence will fill that space.

Today is Native American Ministries Sunday, when we celebrate the deep wisdom and guiding light offered by Native peoples. I know, every tribe was different, but tribal people the world over share some rather common ideas about hospitality and food and including everyone in the circle. Additionally, we are also getting pretty close to Earth Day, a day to celebrate the bounty of our world and understand how we can more compassionately use that bounty for the fulfillment of all people, and that involves food at every level, from the healthy growing and raising of it to the equitable sharing and affording of it. It might seem, sometimes, like we come in here to sing our little songs and hear our little bible story and see what weird instrument Pastor Dave is going to torture us with this week, and that nothing changes when we come to church, but that’s not really true. Flesh, fish, and fulfillment is the epicentric theme of the human experience; that we show forth our humanity around the table, that feeding and nourishing one another is what makes us more human than animal. He could have talked till he was blue in the face, Jesus could have, but they wouldn’t ever have believed him if words were all the proof he had of his humanity. We can talk till we are blue in the face too, preachers and layfolk alike, about the kind and gentle and compassionate and inclusive Jesus, but it is just noise in the wind without inviting one another to the table. Our own families, and our own town, and our own state, and our own country, and our own world are all asking the question that Jesus put to the disciples: do you have anything here to eat? And how we answer that determines, in great measure, the impact of our religion in the world. Amen.