

Easter 3, year B

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Why we go to church on Sunday

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When I went away to college to study journalism after high school, I was a pretty regular attender of Sunday services at Kent State's Catholic Newman Center. I know that for many, college is the time when new intellectual questions and unsupervised Saturday nights challenge previous practices of church attendance. But I wasn't that kid. My friends were at church. I sang and played in the guitar group there. I was a Eucharistic Minister. In college, attending Mass at the Newman Center was a bridge between the Sunday practice orchestrated by my parents, and my own developing life of faith. Plus I enjoyed it.

My junior year in college, I got a deeper drink of what the practice meant to me, when I moved away from home for a summer internship at the daily newspaper in Buffalo New York. It was my first real experience of adulting – paying rent, working in my field, having a roommate and a social life, buying groceries. It was exhausting and bewildering to my 20 year old self.

I also discovered the Newman Center up the street at Buff State, and would walk there on Sunday mornings. I distinctly remember feeling as though each Sunday I was washing up on shore after being tossed in the waves for a week. At the Newman Center I felt caught and held in something both familiar and also distinctly new. It wasn't the same as my faith community back at school. My friends weren't there. I wasn't involved in all the things that always made my church attendance meaningful for me. I barely had the energy to make it to a chair and stay focused. But in that new community, I became aware of the deeper presence that waited for me to stumble in on Sunday morning – Christ waited for me there, and Christ met me in the Word, and Christ fed me at the table, and Christ bid me leave with him and follow him into my week. I'm not sure I would have described it that way then – but it's clear to me now.

I needed the flow of the liturgy and the worship community who brought it to life in order for me to experience Christ in this way, to experience my own resurrection after each bewildering week.

I had a similar experience several years later as an adult. I was working more than 70 hours a week in a performing arts ministry, offering youth retreats, providing entertainment at church suppers, enhancing Sunday worship. Months would go by where I didn't get to my own church on Sunday. You would think that so much religious experience would be over-filling, too enriching, yield a tsunami of grace and insight. But I eventually became dry as dust, burned out, depressed and exhausted. I ultimately demanded one Sunday off a month to spend with my family in my own faith community. It was not enough, but helped.

That too was a startling lesson in the power of liturgy. I could not manage the demands of being a disciple of Jesus, especially a professional minister, if I did not allow myself to be fed and nourished by Christ himself in the regular communal experience of prayer, Scripture and table fellowship with those who knew me and missed me when I was gone. It was not enough to minister to other faith communities every Sunday, even if it ticked all the boxes of worship. I needed to spend time at that way station where I recognized the Risen Christ in the deeply life-giving practice of going to church on Sunday with the community to which I belonged.

Now you might expect me to say that as a priest – we’re supposed to like Sunday. It’s our big day after all. And we get paid to attend. That’s not lost on me. But if it were just something that priests liked to do, those seats would be empty. You come here for a reason – I’m sure that all of us gathered here are attending for all sorts of reasons.

At the same time there is a deeper presence that waits for us to stumble in the door on Sunday morning. The risen Christ waits for us here. Christ meets us in the Word. Christ feeds us at the table, and Christ bids us leave with him and follow him into our respective weeks, our individual lives. That’s the consistent story that we tell and that we enact here every Sunday, no matter what personal set of beliefs we may bring with us.

This is the pattern that is laid out for the community of disciples gathered in the upper room in these post-Easter stories that we’ve been telling for the last few weeks – last Sunday it was from John’s Gospel, and this week it’s from Luke’s. They lay out a pattern of life with the Risen Christ that we’ve been living ever since.

Today’s Gospel comes on the heels of the story of two disciples encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. We didn’t hear that story today, but you might remember it. It’s Easter day, and Cleopos and his unnamed companion, probably his spouse, are hightailing it out of Jerusalem and are talking about all the heart-breaking and disorienting things that happened from Thursday to that day. Then a stranger joins them. He seems not to know anything about the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, in whom they had put their hopes for the redemption of Israel. Or of the rumors that this Jesus has been seen alive by certain women in their company, and that his tomb was empty. Then the stranger gives them a pretty thorough lesson in their own Hebrew Scriptures, against which the life, death and resurrection of Jesus take on a whole new meaning. And when they stop for the evening meal, the stranger blesses the bread and breaks it, and the two disciples recognize that it is indeed their Lord, Jesus, who was with them the whole time. Then he vanishes. They turn around and run those seven miles back to Jerusalem, where they find the rest of their community gathered in the upper room, telling their own tales of Jesus sightings. And today’s Gospel begins.

And practically the same things happens again. Jesus appears among them. Those gathered aren’t sure who they are seeing—fearing that it’s a Ghost. He shares a meal with them, and he opens their minds to understand the Scriptures, and how his own death and resurrection fulfill Israel’s hope for redemption. And all of that helps them to believe it’s really Jesus, and to have faith that they can take their part in God’s plan for that Good News to make it out into the world.

The patterns in these post-Easter Gospels, would have sounded familiar to Luke’s community assembled in their own House Churches. They began their gatherings with Peace be with you. They retold the stories of their Hebrew Scriptures – the law, the prophets, the psalms – and they held them up against their stories of Jesus. They shared a meal. And they, who had likely never met Jesus in the flesh as he had died 50 years before, recognized him, experienced him, felt their hearts burning within them. That’s why they kept gathering in this way.

Because Luke’s house-church communities needed those gatherings in order for all the pieces to fall together – the past, present and future of their identity as people of God. In those gatherings, the bewildering task of discipleship, its fears and sufferings and joys, could be distilled into the

deep waters of faith. And you'd need to drink deeply of those waters if you were going to make it through another week, if you were going to have the strength and the conviction to tell others that the Kingdom of God was at hand. And try not to get arrested by the authorities in the process.

The early church communities needed those weekly gatherings and everything in them – Prayer, Scripture, Meal, Sending forth -- in order to replenish and sustain the faith that discipleship required. And so do we.

If faith only required a sighting of Jesus just as he appeared in first century Palestine, our practice would likely be more like one of those Ghost Hunter shows that my daughter loves to watch. I'm getting a Jesus reading on my electromagnetic field reader, I feel a cold patch, the pews just moved – Jesus must be among us. But the church was very clear from its earliest moments to say that the Risen Jesus was not a ghost –but had hands that touched, feet that reached the ground, a mouth that ate.

Not a ghost. But also not bodily present in an ongoing way – he was soon gone from among them, ascended to Heaven, Luke would soon report. The eye-witness encounters like we had today would end, and the tellers would die, so you couldn't rely on first-hand accounts for your faith.

If faith in Jesus relied only on what already appeared in the Hebrew Scriptures, already the subject of regular, collective study, it would simply be a matter of literacy and interpretation. Faith would require no relationships, no risk, no application. It would be something one consumed rather than something that consumed you.

If faith only required gathering for a meal in the upper room, then who would ever leave that ongoing glorious potluck? Faith would center on a club of friends, whose numbers would shrink over time. Or it would get pretty exclusive – how many can one upper room hold?

And if faith were only fostered out there on the streets, in encounter after encounter with the people you met in their complexity and need, or in conflict with the authorities or push back from family and friends-- you might soon despair, or drop from exhaustion.

But put these experiences together, align them in such away that they reveal God present yesterday, today and tomorrow—and now you have the means to recognize the risen Christ and the energy and vision to follow him out again into the world. Now you have a whole new way of living in that world. Now you have the resurrection life that Jesus promised.

Keep holy the Sabbath day, eat and drink deeply of the song, and the prayers and the meal, because without it you will starve. Immerse yourself in the Scriptures, and look at your life through their sacred filter, so that your life doesn't become the only sacred text you read. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, because if you don't walk out of this place with that commission ringing in your ears, you have been fed and strengthened for nothing, and the Good News will die on the vine.

This here is how we regularly access the deep Sacred waters that are the source of our faith, friends. This is why we go to church on Sunday. Amen.