



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Easter 3
Year B**

Jesus Comes to Coffee Hour

[RCL]: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

The language of scripture is, for the most part, a graceful and formal language.

There's that one place in Paul's epistles where he uses a word we don't use in polite company. There is more than one instance of whining, of rudeness, even of insult. Of course, there are the stories of things we don't associate with a godly people: incest, drunkenness, rape, murder, adultery, prostitution, and so on.

But for the most part, it's a lovely story, a formal telling, of a people's history and experience in a cleaned-up, sometimes methodical, sometimes poetic way.

That is also a cleaned-up way of saying that it's sometimes not very interesting.

Different versions have attempted a variety of styles to deliver the message. The Jerusalem Bible is widely credited with the most beautiful language, at least in the Old Testament books. The New English Bible was a breakthrough of sorts in rendering a compromise, readable, accurate text. Good News for Modern Man has been popular because of both its ready accessibility as a paperback and its language, which for lots of people is more approachable and less intimidating than the traditional King James Version. For those who have trouble with sophisticated English language, it's a whole lot easier to understand. It just isn't accurate to the original texts in a variety of ways. The New International and a few others more popular among conservative Christians are more readable still, though these, too, suffer from inaccuracy.

Still, the most popular and for some, the only "real" Bible, the King James Version (KJV), is the least accurate of all. Generations of Christians are familiar with it because of its language and cadence in poetry, its use in Handel's *Messiah*, and its basis for many of our Christmas hymns. The Revised Standard Version, and more recently the New Revised Standard, at least strives for an accurate transliteration from the original languages—but in the process, it renders a rather "wooden" text.

The result of all of this—the years of familiarity with texts we're accustomed to hearing—is that we think we know what they're saying. We tune out some readings after the first few words are read because we already know what it's going to say.

C'mon, admit it. We all do it.

We grow up identifying passages by subjects: *The Last Supper*. Or by movie adaptation: *The Charlton Heston Part*. Or by a name given to it even if that's not really what it's about: *Doubting Thomas*.

It gives us a handle. But in so doing, it also lets us be lazy in looking at the story for new, even deeper, meaning.

It can be an interesting exercise to take a look at some of the familiar stories in the Bible and imagine new names. Consider, for example, the Parable of the Unjust Judge, that story of the woman who comes to the judge demanding justice, asking again and again and again before the judge gives in and gives her what she asks. How might we understand that parable differently if we called it *How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?*

Today, we read from the Gospel of Luke about Jesus joining the disciples for a meal after he had been crucified and laid in the tomb. Shall we call it *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*

What we usually hear and what is usually preached out of this passage is that Jesus says, "Peace." The disciples are their usual frightened, doubtful, selves. Jesus reassures them and offers proof that he is the Son of God. Then there is a long statement of faith which rehearses the history of expecting a Messiah.

It's great drama, but it probably didn't happen quite that way. In any event, Luke wasn't there as a witness. Let's consider a different focus in this lesson.

More than one person has observed that Jesus showed up wherever there was food. That's promising!

So, consider the story again: the great drama of the cross is over. The disciples are talking. Jesus shows up and says, "Hey." In today's language, he might even ask, "What are you guys looking at?" Jesus then asks all of the disciples gathered together: "Have you got anything to eat?"

Do you see why it might be appropriate to rename this *Jesus Comes to Coffee Hour?*

"Do you have anything to eat?"

That has to be one of the great questions of the Bible, right up there with Cain's question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" and Jesus asking Peter, "Who do you say I am?"

"Have you got anything to eat?"

We could also call this passage *Jesus Gets Right to the Point*, because eating and food are so basic, so necessary, so very ordinary, and so very much a part of human life.

In Luke's Gospel, the story is told in a way that emphasizes Jesus' humanity—and being human, it makes sense that he would first inquire about food. Being dead for three days and rising again is hungry work! But wait: having risen from the dead, would he need to eat? Would he even be *able* to eat?

If he's not asking for food because he's hungry, then what else might be going on here?

This may be as simple as Luke wanting to emphasize that the Christ of God is human as well as divine. Asking for food and eating in front of the bewildered disciples is pretty human.

It *may* be that simple.

But there is another possibility. Luke had firmly established that Jesus was human. He didn't need to interject this tidbit between Jesus reassuring the disciples that he wasn't a ghost and a lengthy statement about God's Messiah.

It's unnecessary unless it has particular meaning.

Luke was Greek, writing for a Greek audience. The popular religions of the Greek world were the mystery cults, where gods and goddesses—for the most part, goddesses—were worshipped from a distance of fear and awe, or regard for the divinity and other-worldliness of a far-off deity.

Jesus brought a different understanding of God. He is *Emmanuel*, God with us. He was God as one of us, God in human flesh.

This passage in Luke may be akin to the story about Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. They were so wrapped up in Jesus as their Lord that they had trouble letting him be one of them. And in this passage in Luke, the disciples are so caught up in their misery, their fear, their *doubt*—that they forget their deeply-ingrained instincts of hospitality:

When a stranger visits, when a guest comes among you, you don't huddle in a corner, you invite them in.

The disciples forgot their manners. Jesus reminded them.

Jesus reminded them in the simplest way that he *was* human, one of them, and he would only enter into their community *if invited*.

Jesus has done his part. We have to do ours.

Two thousand years later, we still prefer the divinity of Christ to the humanity of Jesus.

In the glory and grandeur of our Easter celebrations, we forget the reminder of Christmas: that *Jesus was God in human flesh*.

That is the mystery, the wonder, the miracle of the one we call Jesus the Christ.

Certainly, Luke's Jesus reminds us that he's human, but there is more to it than that; to enter into our hearts, our lives, our community, he wants to be—indeed *needs* to be—*invited*.

Jesus was born into a tradition of absolute, compulsory hospitality. It's what he lived. It's what he taught. And it is what we are called to and to be.

Offering hospitality to Jesus on a personal level is the stuff of altar calls in the best of Baptist tradition: "Invite Jesus into your heart today! C'mon down!"

It is also the foundation of community, whether household or congregation. Coffee hour, our family dinners, any meal where people gather, gives us a chance to practice what we preach.

The next time you offer someone a cup of coffee, a bottle of water, a glass of milk, offer them the knowledge and love of Jesus, as well.

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