

**Living in the Resurrection**  
**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**  
**NPMC – April 30, 2023**

*Scripture: Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47*

*Hymns: Heart with Loving Heart United - VT 813, Strangers No More – VT 409, People of God's Peace – VT 797*

**Psalm 23**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.

**Acts 2:42-47**

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Several weeks ago, Ryan Dueck, pastor of Lethbridge Mennonite Church in Alberta, asked a provocative question in *Canadian Mennonite* magazine: “Are we too progressive for our own good?” He put his complaint this way:

“One of my abiding critiques of the progressive church circles I inhabit is that they often lack what I call existential urgency. God is, we think, very interested in our positions on social issues and is very eager to affirm our journey through various constellations of identities, but God is not so much interested in sin or salvation or judgment or deliverance or the kind of love that breaks down in order to mend. This God is not so much about anything that could set a soul aflame.”<sup>1</sup>

This article, as you might imagine, ignited quite the discussion, and there have been a flurry of responses from all kinds of people. That included a webinar on this topic with contributors Cynthia Wallace (professor and church leader here in Saskatchewan), Peter Haresnape (a Mennonite pastor in Toronto and our good friend from our time there!), Ryan in Alberta, and CM magazine host Aaron Epp in Winnipeg. Something that Peter said in his response to Ryan stood out to me. He said,

**“For me to be part of a Mennonite Anabaptist congregation which affirms my full humanity** and which blesses my marriage, which has space for queer and genderqueer individuals, is amazing. It is ‘a hard-work miracle,’ to borrow a phrase I heard recently, and most of the time it’s dull. We have meetings, and we have potlucks, and we pray together, and we have disagreements, and it’s all small, and yet somehow it participates in this greater beautiful conversation—that conversation and disagreement that God is spurring in the world in God’s attempts to call us into a deeper relationship, into a truer understanding of who we are.”<sup>2</sup>

What a fascinating conversation! Mixed up in this are all kinds of questions about what salvation and faith look like, what constitutes a miracle, and what our expectations are around what it means to be the church and to be in relationship with the Divine. Is it always a matter of dramatic conversion stories and mountain-top experiences, as Ryan

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://canadianmennonite.org/aflame> . To watch the webinar discussion, see:

<https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/are-we-too-progressive-our-own-good>

<sup>2</sup> <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/ten-insights-cms-latest-event>

seems to be seeking? Or can we meet God in more ordinary ways – at meetings and potlucks, in discussions and conversations – as Peter suggests with his idea of “hard-work miracles”?

These are precisely the questions that Christians have asked and pondered all the way back to the time of Jesus. I want to relate them in particular this morning to what it means to live in the time “after” the resurrection – a time we’re still in, as it happens, and have been since that very first Easter morning millennia ago.

Now I personally love the stories of the different disciples and groups meeting the risen Jesus. I love how mysterious they are, how everyone he meets seems so confused and blindsided, and bumbles their way through the encounter (much like they did throughout Jesus’ ministry!). But I also love how mundane these various encounters are. We might expect the risen Jesus to be more dramatic and well, divine, right? To borrow from other biblical stories, maybe we expect him to arrive on a flaming chariot, or to speak from a burning bush, or to blind people with his brightness, or to be accompanied by loud thunder and lightning, and smoke! Shouldn’t our moments of encounter with the Divine, with someone who has just conquered the powers of death, arrive with in-your-face theatrics, even pyrotechnics, in the style of Revelation? But that’s not what we see here. Instead, we get the equivalent of the prophet Elijah’s “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19) – just Jesus, appearing to people as they go about their ordinary days following his death.

He appears to people who had come to visit the grave of a loved one, first of all; he appears to people walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus – about 3 hours (probably a

fairly boring walk!); he appears to people fishing (quite unsuccessfully) in the darkness before dawn; he appears to groups who had gathered in different rooms, including locked ones (likely to hold urgent committee meetings). And, importantly, on two of these occasions, the risen Jesus even sits down to a meal with people – once in the village of Emmaus, where he is the guest (Luke 24) and once on the beach after the fishing where he is the host of the little breakfast of loaves and fish (John 21). Interestingly, these meals are simultaneously ordinary and miraculous – part of a daily ritual of nourishing our bodies as well as evocative of a sacred Communion meal. And meals appear in both of our Scripture passages for today as well.

I was a bit surprised to find Psalm 23 in the lectionary for today, for this post-resurrection Easter season. But it's there, with its well-worn and beloved imagery of God as our attentive Shepherd and gracious Host of a banquet. This imagery of sharing a meal reminds us of all of Jesus' meals during his ministry, as he ate "with tax collectors (Luke 5:27–32), with Pharisees (7:36–50, 14:1–14), in the home of strangers whom the disciples rely on for hospitality (10:1–12), a Passover meal (22:14–30)." Commentator Sharon Betsworth writes, "These meals raise questions for the reader, such as 'Who eats? What do you eat? Where do you eat? With whom do you eat? How do you eat? Why do you eat?' [She continues, Especially in the Gospel of] Luke, meals become an opportunity for social critique and revealing barriers to social interactions. By resurrection day, a new kind of meal interaction takes place. In Luke 24 [the Emmaus

road story], meals are shown to be the place of revelation, a defining point in the life of the community.”<sup>3</sup>

These gatherings around the table become a place where we – quite simply and profoundly – meet God, where we are nourished, body and spirit, by a God who lovingly cares for us, who fills our cup to overflowing (v. 5). In verse 6 of the Psalm – “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” – the verb “follow” is the same as is used for “pursue.” So rather than an enemy or misfortune “pursuing” us, we have a deeply comforting image of goodness and mercy “pursuing” us, of God’s abundant grace that will not leave us. We often read this as a funeral psalm, or a psalm about eternal life. But, as commentator Kelly J. Murphy says, this psalm also “emphasizes life in the here-and-now,” and reminds us of all the “ways in which life in the here-and-now can be joyous and banquet-filled.”<sup>4</sup>

In a similar way, our passage from Acts 2 describes the life of the brand-new church community as one that’s characterized by, among other things, sharing meals together. We’re told that the early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42). They practiced sharing their possessions and spending time in worship and fellowship with one another: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:46-47). It sounds almost idyllic, doesn’t it? There is such joy at belonging together in community, at mutually serving one another in this way. Betsworth

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-242-47-6>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-psalm-23-29>

says, “Joy and gladness mark their days; their abundant joy is contagious, and others continually join their fellowship.” She goes so far as to call this “a glimpse of the new creation; a glimpse of the new birth given through the resurrection of Christ. These glimmers of the reign of God seem so far off in our days, but they are as near as our worship, prayer, and fellowship can take us,” she concludes. Now the church in Acts is not a perfect community. The chapters that follow make that clear – including some trouble they run into around people not receiving the same food around the table! But it’s quite notable that this is what distinguishes this new community – this continuation of Jesus’ radical yet ordinary gathering of people around tables for meals,<sup>5</sup> this “hard-work miracle” of nourishing and being nourished and sustained.

In her book on the rituals of grief, Amanda Held Opelt (sister to the late Rachel Held Evans) has a whole chapter on food and grief, called “Casseroles.” She speaks about how life-giving it was to be fed and nourished by loved ones after experiencing a deep loss. She writes, “Why does food hold such a powerful and captivating place in our imaginations? Perhaps it is because the act of eating is experienced both by the body and the soul.” After loss, eating becomes “a choice to begin savouring once again the beauty and goodness that life has to offer. It is an act of faith that abundance still exists, even as you recover from an encounter with sorrow. ...To eat is a holy act. So holy, Christ chose it as one of the church’s most central acts of worship. ‘Of all the things he could’ve chosen to be done “in remembrance of him,” Jesus chose a meal. He could

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-242-47-6>

have asked his followers to do something impressive or mystical ... but instead he picks the most ordinary of acts, eating, through which to be present with his people.”<sup>6</sup>

It wasn't that long ago that we were unable to gather around tables as a faith community because of the pandemic. What a joy it has been to be able to resume these rituals of gathering and breaking bread together once again, whether we are gathered around potluck tables or the Communion table! These practices may not be flashy or dramatic, but they are places where we meet God as both guest and host of this holy-yet-mundane love feast. They are moments in which our whole selves are nourished and loved, moments in which our bodies, minds, spirits and hearts are simply held and sustained in the generosity of God's care. And that is why they make all the difference.

AMEN

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<sup>6</sup> Amanda Held Opelt, *A Hole in the World: Finding Hope in Rituals of Grief and Healing* (New York: Worthy Publishing, 2022), 95-96.