

*See What*

**Text:**

Luke 24: 36b-48

**A sermon preached by**  
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## Luke 24: 36b-48

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

**37** They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

**38** He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

**39** 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."

**40** And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

**41** While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

**42** They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

**43** and he took it and ate in their presence.

**44** 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."

**45** Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

**46** 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,

**47** and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

**48** You are witnesses of these things.



I was in Center City last evening and the streets were teeming with people enjoying the beautiful spring weather. All shapes and sizes, hues and tones, languages from around the world. Philadelphia is a beautiful place to experience the depth and width of our diversity in all its forms.

Many of the people were there for the same reason I was – to eat. I love going to a nice restaurant where you are treated as if you're the only one who matters: Tap or bottled or sparkling water? Can I

get you a glass of wine? Would you like an appetizer? Would you like to hear the specials for this evening?

It's a beautiful thing – hospitality.

There's something great about walking into a hotel lobby after a long distance travel adventure, having a door attendant open the front door for you, ask about your bags, having a smiling front desk clerk ask to check you in, a bowl of apples or warm cookies on the counter enticing you, the comfy sofa in the lobby calling out to you.

Hospitality.

It's reported that:

- Hospitality is the world's fastest growing industry and will add one new job every 2.5 seconds.
- The hospitality industry is growing at a rate of 23 percent faster than that of the global economy, employing 212 million and earning approximately \$3.4 trillion (U.S.) annually. (World Travel and Tourism Council)
- The hospitality industry in the US is the #1 employer (after government), 8.1% of all jobs.
- Tourism is the first, second, or third largest employer in 32 states.
- Demand for Restaurant/Food Service Managers expected to increase 21-35% through the year 2010.
- Hotel Managers and Assistant Managers positions are expected to grow 10-20% through the year 2010.

Today we think of hospitality as a business – a business that takes care of us in every detail as we travel. Or we might think of it in a more personal sense as the custom of feeding and housing family or friends in our homes for a day or two. It’s what’s happening in the Gospel story this morning – these two disciples walking along the road to their home in Emmaus encounter a stranger who seems to need somewhere to crash for the night so they extend hospitality.

But the writers of our scripture were working with a significantly different definition of hospitality or *xenia*. It is an ancient custom revolving around the practice of welcoming strangers or travelers while promising to provide them with provisions and protection. And hospitality in the first century – in any century, for that matter – could be a very risky venture.

Strangers who were traveling in a new region did not always find a hospitable reception in antiquity. For starters, they were easy prey for thieves and robbers who trolled the roadways in sparsely populated areas. Furthermore, many townspeople saw mysterious strangers as threats and therefore sought to shun, abuse, or eliminate these outsiders before they could harm the community. In the story of the city of Sodom (Genesis 19:1- 11), for example, we learn how some people wanted to take advantage of Lot and his family and violently abuse them rather than understanding God’s requirement that we welcome them and provide hospitality.

One of the core features of ancient hospitality included the host’s implicit vow to provide the stranger with protection as a way to neutralize potential threats—both threats to strangers and threats to one’s community. Generous hosts were protecting strangers from thieves along the road and from townspeople inclined toward mob violence and they were seeking to protect their household and community from the wrath of the stranger. When the “guests” arrive at your door, you would feed them an initial meal and if necessary provide lodging and maybe even clean clothes without asking questions about their identity or place of origin. Only after

the guests had finished the meal would the host finally inquire as to the guests' identity, home region, and travels.

Hospitality is the context of the Emmaus Road story we read this morning – the walkers welcome into their home the stranger they encounter on the road. No questions asked about his identify or his journey or his destination. It's in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the food at that table that Jesus is revealed to them.

Failed hospitality is the context of the disciples encounter with Jesus when the Emmaus travelers go back to Jerusalem and tell their story. The Risen Jesus appears and rather than offer them food, they wait until he reveals himself and he has to *ask* for food.

When we go to a restaurant like I did last evening we expect hospitality, no questions asked. I often catch the server's name and chat as I choose my food selection. I joke with the men and women who clean the tables and deliver the food. I talk to the manager who checks in to see how it's going. It's a ritual, of sorts, as we exchange pleasantries in the sharing of a meal. Yet never once did the staff question where I was from or ask for identification to verify who I was or fear my reason for being there.

Yet there are so many people in the world around us that aren't able to do that which we take for granted. We see images of them on the very same television that tempts us to try the latest combo meal at McDonald's (where we also expect hospitality!) or to try out the newest restaurant in town to experience a taste we've never known before. But on that television we also see children who look like they have full bellies, but really their stomachs are swelled from malnutrition. We're worried about looking too fat when people on the screen look back at us through bodies that look like skeletons with a thin layer of skin.

Or even closer than the television screen, we see people right here in our own communities – people in the city and in the suburbs as well – unable to get even their basic meal let alone the McDonald's combo meal or Steven Starr restaurant experience. Many are here

at Hope every third Saturday to receive from us the hospitality of our Food Bank and its volunteers.

Last night after my nice meal, I walked a bit to burn off some calories and stopped to add money to the parking meter. A man leaning against a wall reading a book asked me for spare change – I said, truthfully, that I had none. After being at the car I walked by him again – he asked again and I shrugged my shoulders. I changed my direction and walked by him again – a third time he asked and I kept walking. What kind of hospitality is that? I never even got to know his name, have his identity revealed to me, because I didn't give him the nickel I found buried in my pocket which I had picked up off the floor earlier that day? What kind of hospitality?

The hospitality of food makes a difference in people's lives. It's a matter of life and death for all of us. And for most of us it's as easy as opening the refrigerator door or our pocketbooks and the food is there.

I watched a documentary about Mother Theresa and the ministry of the Sisters of Mercy. One of the most touching and powerful scenes in that film was of some of the sisters working in a shelter in India feeding starving children and adults. They didn't use spoons. They simply picked up the rice and hand-fed it into the mouths of those walking skeletons – people too weak to lift their heads off the cots, unable to feed themselves, barely able to open their lips for this simple meal. And here were these Christian sisters willing to pick up the food and feed strangers in need.

Hospitality – and the sharing of food – makes a difference to these people – to the sisters of Mercy and to the hungry of India. Food makes a difference – to all of us – to me at the restaurant, to the Food Bank guests, to the nameless guy on the street.

After Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, one of their first complaints just after having left slavery – “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the

fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you, [Moses], have brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exodus 16:3) So God provided them bread from heaven.

And then there was Jesus teaching the crowd that had gathered on the side of a small hill to hear what he had to say. More than five thousand people – all getting hungry as the day wore on. The disciples told Jesus to send them home before they got unruly – you know how a hungry crowd can get. Jesus said to the disciples, “You give them something to eat.” Between them they could scrounge up only five loaves and two fish. Jesus divided the crowd into small groups and they calmed down, and they were fed. (Matthew 5)

In the early days of the church in Corinth, we read about the controversy surrounding food that had been sacrificed to idols. Can Christians in good conscience eat the meat from animals sacrificed to pagan idols? Some in Corinth said yes, others said no. And it became such a point of contention that Paul had to remind them, “Food will not bring us close to God.” (1 Corinthians 8). Also at Corinth there was uproar over the sharing of the common meal that was served prior to worship. It seems as if some would get to the meeting place early, eat all of the food, and leave none for those who came a little late. And it was most likely the financially poorer people that came late – those who were servants in homes of the upper class. Wealthier Christians could get away from their daily routine earlier; they would get to the house for worship earlier, and they were unwilling to wait for those who had to work later serving others. Those who already had the most food – the middle class – were eating everything before those with less food – the servant class – could get to the covered dish supper. Paul told them to knock it off: “When you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you get hungry, eat at home ...” (11:33-34).

And how many times do we get hung up on food in our modern church? I could tell you many stories – you could probably tell me stories – of churches where arguments blow up over a spaghetti

dinner or pancake breakfast or strawberry festival or chicken barbeque.

Food makes a difference. But should it? Should we get so hung up over food? It fills our bellies, sure. Food can make us feel great, sure. Food can be a matter of life and death. But should it control our emotions and cloud our vision the way it does. What's the big deal about food?

It's not really the food – food fills our bellies – but it is the hospitality connected to it that sometimes we miss our cues and get overwhelmed by. In today's Gospel lesson, we read of a post resurrection appearance of Jesus who had just appeared to two disciples from Jerusalem following his death – they were headed home to Emmaus. They didn't recognize him as they all walked along together. It was only until he agreed to stay with them for the evening meal and he broke the bread that their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

And now Jesus appears to the whole group of followers. And they failed. Again. They simply don't believe. These people had walked and talked and ate with Jesus many times before and they had heard what he had taught them. He had explained that he would in some way return to them, he had told them of his resurrection, and here he was right in front of them and they forgot about their duty to provide hospitality. They wait for him to ask and identify himself.

Jesus asks, "Do you have anything to eat?" What's he need food for? They give him grilled fish, he ate it, and they suddenly begin to understand. "He opened their minds to understand the scriptures," Luke tells us. "Ohhh, that's what he was talking about!"

One might be quick to jump to the conclusion that it was the food that made the difference. Jesus broke bread – their eyes were opened. Jesus ate fish – their minds were opened. Bread – fish. Food is the clue, therefore food is important.

Yet I suggest to you that food is not important.

You see, what Jesus did for those two on the Emmaus Road and the others gathered later was by receiving their hospitality he allowed them to understand more clearly what they already had within themselves. It was inside all of the time – he opened their eyes, he opened their minds. Suddenly they believed and understood what they already knew within themselves, that Jesus was in some mysterious and revelatory way in their lives from God. They knew already, though they didn't quite understand it all, that Jesus was risen from the dead and that he would be alive in their lives forever.

The food did not make the difference. What they gave from within themselves made the difference. They had the message within all along; Jesus simply gave them the opportunity to bring it to the surface. There's no magic recipe of food that caused them to believe. There was and is only the opportunity toward awareness that Jesus created by his presence.

Another street encounter from a few years ago that my friend, Bryan, constantly tells about me. We were in Baltimore headed to an Orioles game. We had just finished a pub meal and Bryan, his son Zack, and I walked with the crowd toward the park. A man asked for spare change and most pushed past him. This time, I reached in to my pocket and gave him a dollar. Bryan says that they walked another block, turned around to look for me, and there I was back with the stranger still. They whistled for me – I ran to catch up – “What? I was telling him a joke!” They just shook their heads.

Isn't that a better God-response than my ignoring the guy three times last night?

See what love God has given. That's what hospitality is. Modeling that love God has given by offering it without reservation or doubt to those around us. See what love.

