

3rd Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

I'd like to tell you story about a woman named Carolyn Jordan. Carolyn Jordan was the manager of the refectory (a fancy word for cafeteria) at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. But she was not known as Carolyn, or Ms. Jordan. She was lovingly and affectionately known as Mama C. Mama C was a gentle, wise, and exceedingly kind African American woman who took care of everyone who came into that refectory, an old cavernous room that looked a bit like the great hall from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

I got to know Mama C well because I worked in the refectory my first year at seminary for my work study to help pay for my tuition. I tended to work the breakfast shift so I would come in three or four mornings

every week to serve the food to my fellow students and then wash dishes before heading to my first class of the day. Mama C would always be there to greet me with a smile.

As I got my morning coffee prepared, she would look at me and say, “Honey, how you doin’?” Most mornings I would say, “I’m doing fine, Mama C.” But then she would cock her head and grin at me with a little wink and say, “No, sweetheart, how you *really* doin’?” And then, depending on the day, I would tell her how I was *really* doing.

I’m told that she did that with most folks. She knew that people didn’t just come in to her refectory for physical bread, they came in to her refectory for other kinds of bread: bread of compassion, bread of wisdom, bread of kindness, bread of empathy...you know, ministry bread.

No one left her refectory hungry. It didn’t matter if their account was up to date and paid in full or not. It didn’t matter if they left their student ID card in their apartment. It didn’t matter if you were a student or a visitor. She didn’t care if you were the most respected tenured professor or the mostly ignored janitor or maintenance guy, she treated you with the same respect and kindness. Simply put, the rest of the seminary was the domain of other people, but the refectory was her place to minister to us.

A year or two before I arrived at Columbia Theological Seminary, a bit of drama happened, a good kind of drama. Not a drama that’s done over some silly stuff. But a kind of drama that happens when the status quo is brought into question.

You see, the refectory at Columbia Theological Seminary is a large room with wooden walls. And all around the room, hanging above the tables and the chairs, are portraits of esteemed faculty. Folks like Walter Brueggemann, our most famous former faculty member, hung in their places of honor.

There were spoken and unspoken truths about what it took to get your portrait on the wall of the refectory. The spoken truth was that you had to have at least one doctorate degree, dozens of published articles and books, and, of course, tenure. But there was an unspoken truth as well. The unspoken truth was that in order to get your place of honor on the refectory wall you had to be both male and white.

You see, all of the portraits had one thing in common, every single one was a white man. That was, until a certain student decided to change all that without the permission of, well, anyone.

It all changed when one morning the faculty, staff, and students gathered for breakfast and noticed that there was a new addition to the walls of honor on the refectory. Suddenly, in a frame the exact size and design of all the rest, stood a beaming portrait of Mama C. The contrast couldn’t have been more stark. White man, white man...African American woman.

And, what’s more, under each portrait was the name of the person as well as their faculty title. So and so, Professor of Homiletics. So and so, Professor of Systematic Theology. So and so, Professor of Christian Education. So and so, Professor of Pastoral Care.

Below Mama C’s portrait were written the following words: Carolyn “Mama C” Jordan, Professor of Hospitality.

A student had decided to take it upon himself to bestow Mama C the same honor that all the other white men around her had. Mama C, as far as I know, didn't have any advanced degrees. She hadn't written any peer-reviewed articles or published any books. She didn't have tenure and she certainly got paid far less than any of the white men that she was surrounded by. But she was no less an important part of the education I received at Columbia Theological Seminary. Mama C taught me just as much, if not more, than many of the other professors I had.

The best part of this all? The seminary administration didn't *dare* take Mama C's portrait down. It hung for years proudly until the day Mama C retired, when it was gifted to her and hung in her house. I'm also now proud to say that the walls in the refectory at Columbia Seminary have since changed. While the portraits are still mostly of white men, there is a growing number of portraits of esteemed faculty that are either persons of color or women. The ratio is changing, my friends! And it all began, with a portrait of Mama C.

Mama C died a few days ago. After a lifetime of serving others, Columbia Theological Seminary's Professor of Hospitality is now dining at the Table set for her by our Resurrected Christ.

Today's story from the Gospel of Luke is a story of how Jesus made himself known to his disciples after his resurrection. Jesus had achieved the impossible; life after death. The Roman Empire could brag all day long about how mighty and powerful they were. But at the end of the day, every Roman eventually was going to die and stay dead. But Jesus, that subversive and countercultural prophet from Galilee, defeated death, the enemy that even the Romans could never quite defeat.

Jesus could have spent the days following his resurrection very differently than how we're told in today's passage. Jesus could have gone straight to social media and bragged to his millions of twitter followers. Jesus could have traveled the countryside, throwing political rallies and basking in the glory of his fanbase. Jesus could have written a New York Times Bestseller and retired early off of the earnings.

But Jesus did none of that.

Jesus chose to go on a walk with two of his friends. But they didn't recognize him. Grief does that to you. Grief numbs you to what's beautiful around you. Their lament closed their eyes and they didn't recognize him.

But Jesus knew how open their eyes. He gathered around a table and took a loaf of bread. He blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened. Christ was made known to them in the breaking of bread.

Friends, the Resurrected Christ is made known to us in the breaking of bread. That simplest of acts. And Mama C taught me and so many other students that. You see, at the end of the day, the Gospel is not proclaimed so much by eloquent sermons, or fancy church buildings, or huge choirs, or whatever else. At the end of the day, the Gospel is proclaimed simply by breaking bread with one another.

Or, to put it another way, the Gospel - in its most basic and crucial form - is not about homiletics, or systematic theology, or christian education, or published books, or faculty tenure. The Gospel at its very core is about hospitality. And the moment we forget that is the moment we cease being the Church.

So, today, let us give thanks for the “Mama C’s” in our life who have taught us Christ’s hospitality. Let us give thanks for those who have invited us to sit with them and break bread with them when we so desperately needed our daily serving of compassion and comfort in a world that can be so harsh.

And let us continue to break bread with one another. Because such a small act of hospitality can, if only for a moment, lift the veil of grief and allow the resurrected Christ to minister to and with us.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**