

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
First Congregational UCC Appleton
Luke 24:36b-48
April 14, 2024

It feels good to be back in this pulpit, friends, just as it felt good to be with you during the call weekend in January and to officially begin serving as your new co-pastor on Easter Sunday. These have been such tender days. I felt honored to witness your loving farewell for Pastor Mary Jo last week. I recognized the all-too-familiar sorrow that accompanies the closure of a meaningful ministry. It was poignant to participate in the liturgy ending her authorized ministry last week, so very soon after I spoke the same words of mutual gratitude and release. Last Sunday after worship I found myself swirling with emotions. I am grieving the community we left behind. I'm anxious about my family's capacity to adjust to new jobs and new schools, all at the same time. I'm overwhelmed by how much I need to learn about this new context - not just faces and names, but histories and traditions and where the stamps are. I'm eager to know what my pastoral responsibilities will be once we sort out the new leadership model, even as I'm mindful that intentionality and patience are critical to sorting this out well.

I'm also thrilled - full of anticipation for the gifts and graces of this unfolding chapter. I'm delighted by my new pastor's study, especially my window overlooking the Fox River. I'm savoring the conversations I'm having with members and friends of

the church. Hearing personal stories and marveling at the ways God is at work in peoples' lives has always been one of the best parts of this vocation.

All of this is to say that I am a person of big emotions, and these last few weeks the emotions have been bigger than ever. And, more contradictory. How can I be so sad and so happy, so anxious and so delighted, all at the same time?

I suppose the same way the disciples could be filled to the brim with joy in the presence of Jesus, while also staggering under the weight of disbelief.

Now *these* are big emotions - they were elated, even euphoric - and they were anxious and terrified.

I can almost feel the physiological overload they must have been experiencing. One Disciple felt it in his gut, as if riding an entirely anachronistic roller coaster. Another Disciple surely experienced the resurrection of Jesus as a cardiac event, heart pounding out palpitations of astonishment. We know from other gospel testimony that Mary's reaction was to weep. Now that one resonates with me.

Meanwhile, Jesus was having a different physiological experience in his divinely resurrected body. He was **hungry**.

Perhaps this is not technically an emotion, but tell that to a person who skipped lunch and is downright hangry for supper. Many theologians claim that Jesus only ate the fish to prove that he was not an apparition. After all, ghosts don't eat sardines.

But if Jesus was walking around in a resurrected body complete with flesh and bones, that body also had an appetite. When our Risen Lord lifted that piece of perfectly broiled fish to his lips, his mouth watered.

Jesus could have eaten any number of biblically significant foods. He might have requested a plate of figs, for instance, or a bit of leftover bread. Maybe it was mere coincidence that the daily special was seafood; his disciples were fishermen, and fish was central to the gastronomy of Galilee. But coincidence is rarely a feature in biblical literature. When scripture gives us a detail, more often than not it is asking us to make a connection. The weirder the detail the more likely it is working on multiple levels, continuing a theme or echoing a story.

Maybe the fish is just a fish. But I see a hyperlink in the text, begging us to click and see where it goes. I believe it goes to the book of Jonah. Speaking of the weirdness of scripture, it doesn't get much weirder than the book of Jonah. Most of you are familiar with the basics of the story - it's a Sunday school favorite, though the kid versions usually leave out the weirdest parts.

The gist is this: God calls Jonah to be a prophet to the people of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh are the *worst*. They were shameless in their greed and violence, and Jonah did not want them to repent and be spared God's wrath. Jonah wanted to pull out his lawn chair, crack open a cold beverage, and cackle while God leveled his sworn enemies.

Jonah hated the Ninevites so much he completely abandoned his prophetic calling. He did not go to Nineveh, but rather boarded a ship for Tarshish, in the opposite direction. Jonah was willing to die rather than participate in their redemption. When a fearsome storm arose, everyone on the ship knew that the storm was not just a storm. Indeed, the narrator tells us "the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea," and after some comical back and forth, Jonah convinced his shipmates to hurl him into the sea.

It worked. The tempest died, and Jonah would have too if that great big fish hadn't come by, foraging for breakfast. Down Jonah went, into the belly of the fish. For three days he waited and prayed. Then, God had a little chat with the fish, who spit the prophet onto dry land. Jonah didn't bother to resist the second time God commanded him to go to Nineveh. He went, he prophesied, and his sworn enemies actually believed in God, repented, and were forgiven.

You would think Jonah might feel happy about this remarkable turn of events. Jonah did not. Jonah was livid. "He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." **I guess you could also say that Jonah had big emotions, too.**

The hyperlink to Jonah is not just the presence of a fish in the story. Jesus referenced the story of Jonah as a way of making sense of his own impending death and resurrection. In the gospels, when people came to Jesus asking for a sign that his teaching was truly from God, Jesus refused and said the only sign they'd get would be the sign of Jonah.

And here's where I'm really going to nerd out for a minute. Because it's not just that Jesus spent three days in a grave and Jonah spent three days in a fish. When you start poking around in the original Hebrew, it turns out there's something else happening. The first time the fish is mentioned in the book of Jonah, it's in the male form of the noun. It's coded to represent death - a sea monster slithering up to devour and destroy. But once Jonah is in the belly of the fish, it's the female form of the noun. It's coded to represent new life. The tomb becomes a womb. Death gives way to rebirth. **Hello, resurrection.**

The fish of death consumed Jonah, and was transformed into a fish of life, that Jonah might go and proclaim life-giving words to a group of people who were alienated from goodness, and estranged from God. A group of people Jonah hated so much he'd been willing to die **that they might not be saved.**

Meanwhile. "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." All nations, all people – anyone

and everyone who was alienated from goodness and estranged from God. People whom Jesus loved so much he'd been willing to die **that they might be saved.**

The resurrection is the sign of Jonah. Jesus happily wolfing down broiled fish is a hilarious exclamation point on the fulfillment of the prophecy. It's another way of amplifying the astonishing truth that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death has been vanquished.

And the Disciples saw it, with their own teary eyes. They felt it, with beating hearts, and butterfly-filled stomachs. With disbelieving joy, they comprehended the impossible truth that God had raised their beloved friend and teacher from the dead. With disbelieving joy, they understood the depth of God's steadfast love and the breadth of God's relentless grace. With disbelieving joy, **they witnessed the resurrected Jesus eat death for breakfast.**

All of our big feelings: fear and joy, anger and gratitude, sorrow and contentment, doubt and courage, grief and awe - they're all welcome at that breakfast table where, in the fullness of time, they will be metabolized into hope.

May we feel disbelieving joy as we comprehend, as we understand, as we witness the Risen Christ among us this Eastertide.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

